Chapter 6

Filming the War: Television, Kenneth Griffith and the Boer War

In her study of the presentation of the Great War in television documentaries, Emma Hanna notes that such histories serve much the same purpose as war memorials. Both, she argues, are carefully constructed representations of the past, artfully composed so that the story they portray 'will be accepted in the moment of their creation and by the society for whom they are created'.[1] But here Hanna is ploughing a lone furrow. Invariably, the small screen, as distinct from cinema, is ignored by cultural historians, dismissed as nothing more than mere entertainment. Yet, the past enshrined in historical documentaries has an immediacy, power and influence that no single monument or, for that matter, written history, could ever attain. Indeed, so all pervasive is television that many academic historians fear that it undermines the public's ability to appreciate the complexity of historical events by propagating inaccuracies and myths, an 'agreed' version of the past. Simon Schama has neatly summarised such academic navel-gazing as:

> the usual moan of the Common Room and the opinion columns that 'serious television' is a 'contradiction in terms'; that the subtlety of history is too elusive, too fine and slippery to be caught in television's big hammy fist; that try as it might, television can't help but simplify the complications; personalise the abstract; sentimentalise the ideological and just forget about the deep structure – all of which are assumed to be at the heart of what my colleagues (on that side of the fence) like to call real history.[2]

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[1] Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 163.

[2] Simon Schama, 'Television and the Trouble with History', in David Cannadine (ed.), *History and the Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 20.

In articulating these fears, academics are not only tacitly admitting to the power of television but also acknowledging the influence that the medium has in shaping public memory. Such power has, unsurprisingly, long been appreciated by those within the television industry. Producers and directors have consistently maintained that the medium is particularly suited to the broadcasting of history, as its strengths lie in 'telling stories and anecdotes, creating atmosphere and mood, giving diffuse impressions'.[3]

This chapter will focus on the work of Kenneth Griffith. Obsessed with Britain's imperial past in general and the conflict in South Africa in particular, Griffith wrote and presented three seminal works for television between 1967 and 1999 that not only reacquainted the viewing public with the events of 1899 to 1902 but also tackled head on the orthodoxy of an honourable war. Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Leo Amery, in *The Times History of the War*, had raised concerns about the army's management and leadership in South Africa, this criticism had fallen well short of questioning the conflict's moral justification. For Amery, the war had been a necessary step in the nation's imperial mission. Such certainty mirrored the filmic version of the war presented in a series of short 'entertainments' to the avid cinema-going public of late Victorian and early Edwardian Britain.[4] The forty-four 'entertainment' films of the Boer War that were exhibited in Britain between November 1899 and December 1912 resolutely portrayed the fighting as part of a grand heroic narrative, a natural extension of the patriotic colonial campaigning of the late nineteenth century.[5] With the killing grounds of France and Flanders quickly supplanting the kopjes and veldt of South Africa in the public consciousness, the Boer War largely escaped the revisionism and debunking of the First World War and continued to be portrayed as the last good war.[6] Indeed, for some, the mechanised slaughter of total war served only to reinforce the myth of the noble Boer and chivalrous Tommy. The journalist, E. W. Smith, who covered the siege of Ladysmith for the *Morning Leader*, noted that the Boer War lacked the sustained horror of the Western Front, while J. F. C. Fuller, the military historian and theorist who served in both wars, insisted in his 1937 memoir, *The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars*, that 'by fighting in a sporting way we endowed the

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[3] Jerry Kuehl, 'History on the Public Screen', in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 178–179.

[4] For a definition of 'entertainments' see Denis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue 1895–1970: A Guide to Entertainment Films* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973).

[5] Richard Schellhammer, 'How the Boer War Saved the Movies: The Depiction of the Boer War in Early British Cinema', http://westalabama.academia.edu/RichardSchellhammer/Papers (accessed 22 June 2010).

[6] For more on the changing representations of the Great War, see Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Todman, *The Great War*.

[Boer] war with a chivalrous atmosphere'.[7] Even Kitchener's bloody endgame of sweeping the veldt was sanitised in Winston Churchill's interwar autobiography as a time when 'humanity and civilization were never wholly banished, and both sides preserved amid frightful reciprocal injuries some mutual respect'.[8] This romanticised version of the fighting in South Africa, as Kenneth O. Morgan has noted, remained firmly entrenched in the public memory of the war for much of the twentieth century.[9] It was only with Kenneth Griffith's one-off documentary about the siege of Ladysmith, *Soldiers of the Widow* (BBC2, 1967), that the first serious challenge to the orthodoxy was mounted. This was followed up five years later by the four-part series *Sons of the Blood: The Great Boer War 1899–1902* (BBC 2, 1972) and, for the conflict's centenary, a two-part documentary, *Against the Empire: The Boer War* (BBC 2, 1999). To explore just how these three works raised new questions about the war and tested public perceptions, it will be necessary to look beyond the programmes' content and instead examine the process of selection and the editorial decisions that shaped Griffith's presentation.

Born in Tenby, Pembrokeshire, Kenneth Griffith was raised in a strictly Nonconformist household by his paternal grandparents. Later in life he would attribute his obsession for challenging the establishment line to the influence the dissenting tradition of Wesleyan Methodism had during his formative years.[10] Although he first came to national prominence as an actor, appearing in a number of British cinematic hits in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was in what was effectively a second career as a documentary-maker that he was able to indulge fully his passion for questioning authority.[11] Described by the *Independent* as 'one of the most distinguished trouble-makers of his time', Griffith was drawn towards subjects that were calculated to antagonise opinion-makers on both the Right and the Left.[12] Thus, he supported Sinn Fein in *Hang Out your Brightest Colours: The Life and Death of Michael Collins* (ATV, 1972) and defended Afrikaners in *Zola Budd: The Girl Who Didn't Run* (BBC2, 1989). To Griffith, there was no contradiction in such eclecticism. In a nod towards the Nonconformity of his childhood, he described television as

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7 E. W Smith, quoted in Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Boer War and the Media (1899–1902)', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13: 1 (2002), pp. 1–16; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars*, p. xxv.

8 Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Odhams Press Ltd, 1930), p. 351.

9 Morgan, 'The Boer War and the Media', pp. 14–16.

10 Dennis Baker, 'Griffith, Kenneth Reginald (1921–2006)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Kenneth Griffith, *The Fool's Pardon: The Autobiography of Kenneth Griffith* (London: Little Brown and Co., 1994), pp. 1–31.

11 Among the more notable of Griffith's acting credits were roles in such films as *Lucky Jim* (1957), *I'm All Right Jack* (1959) and *Only Two Can Play* (1962).

12 *Independent,* 26 June 2006.

'the biggest pulpit ever devised' where it would be possible to challenge the complacency of the nation's leaders and the viewing public by 'speaking up for those who were often ignored or suppressed'.[13] To this end, he told the controller of BBC2 in 1972, he felt compelled to address Britain's imperial past and what he saw as 'the terrible unconfessed questions hanging over it'. It was, he insisted, 'only by answering a few of these painful questions truthfully that the country would gain greater dignity in the eyes of the miserable world'.[14] The South African War was to be the battleground where Griffith would confront the British public with these uncomfortable truths.

Soldiers of the Widow (BBC2, 1967)

Kenneth Griffith was first and foremost an actor. In 1937, at the age of sixteen, he joined the Cambridge Festival Theatre as a bit player and was to continue appearing on stage, television and cinema screens until shortly before his death in 2004. Indeed, it was his renown as an actor, and his ability to hold an audience, that provided him with his first break as a documentary film-maker in 1965. On the back of a successful interview on BBC2's *Tonight* programme, in which he had talked at length about his fascination for the South African War, he was approached by the then controller of the channel, David Attenborough, to produce and present a film on the subject. Understandably apprehensive about his lack of professional experience, Griffith was, nevertheless, confident that 'new ground could be broken in the style of television communication'.[15] The 'pulpit' of the television documentary was, he later argued, the perfect platform for his particular skills set. By fusing the hobbyist's infectious enthusiasm with the actor's rhetorical flair he would, he claimed, be able to move on from the anodyne objectivity of the historian and tell 'his personal deeply felt truth'.[16]

Griffith chose the siege of Ladysmith as the focus for the documentary. He had first visited the town fifteen years earlier when on tour with the Old Vic and although he states in his autobiography that at the time he knew little about the South African War, the battlefield is, nonetheless, infused with a brooding prescience:

> The dead soldiers and the awful suffering they had endured were about to look at me and wink and smile and perhaps even hope that I would speak for them. The poor innocent British 'Tommies' and the shaggy strange ghosts of Dutch and Huguenot farmers: the Boers. Perhaps all of them hoped that

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13 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 184.

14 BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter BBCWAC), T41/535/1, Kenneth Griffith to Robin Scott, 11 September 1972, p. 5.

15 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 173.

16 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, pp. 178–179.

> I would be interested enough in their old strivings and sufferings to listen carefully and perhaps even say something about it.[17]

Even allowing for the wisdom of hindsight, the passage provides an interesting insight into Griffith's approach to film-making. Fiercely passionate about the South African War, with a deeply held sense of right and wrong, he saw it as his duty to uncover the injustices of Britain's imperial past and to 'reveal the truths which even our political leaders … preferred not to know'.[18] Central to this crusade were the ordinary soldiers, Boer and British. Committed to providing a voice for the 'exploited against the exploiters', Griffith felt a deep empathy for, and responsibility to, the rank and file troops of both sides.[19] He was, he argued, 'commissioned to be their advocate'.[20]

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this highly personalised approach to documentary-making resulted in Griffith clashing with his BBC appointed director, Lawrence Gordon Clark. Given the responsibility for turning Griffith's somewhat rambling research notes into a coherent narrative, Clark produced, by Griffith's own admission, 'a typical, well-written, objective BBC television documentary script'.[21] However, to Griffith, Clark's work lacked passion. Not only, therefore, did he insist on rewriting the entire script but he also demanded that the completed film be re-edited to emphasise the 'dramatic continuity and tension' of the story.[22] For Griffith it was essential that he had personal control over all aspects of production if he was to fulfil his responsibilities as presenter and 'speak for those old soldiers, both Boers and Britons'.[23]

Aired on BBC2 on Saturday 27 May 1967 *Soldiers of the Widow* certainly bore the stamp of Griffith's passions and prejudices. The opening sequence sets the tone. Griffith, standing on top of Spion Kop by the graves of three soldiers from the Lancashire Fusiliers, stares sternly into the camera and asks accusingly, 'Why were these men executed and who executed them?'[24] A brief summary of the negotiations between Chamberlain, Milner and Kruger over the rights of the Uitlanders, the disenfranchised immigrants who flocked to Johannesburg to work in the goldmines, soon provides the answer: 'These Lancashire men were executed … because of British greed for someone else's gold'.[25] The narrative swiftly moves on to the repeated attempts by the British under Sir Redvers Buller to relieve Sir George White's beleaguered garrison in Ladysmith. Charting the

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17 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 126.
18 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon,* p. 172.
19 BBCWAC, T41/535/1,Griffith to Scott, 11 September 1972, p. 6.
20 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 176.
21 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 175.
22 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 182.
23 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 175.
24 BBCWAC, T5426/2031, Post Production Script, dated 18 March 1967, p. 1.
25 BBCWAC, T5426/2031, Post Production Script, dated 18 March 1967, p. 2.

halting progress of the British army, from the first ill-fated engagement with the Boers at Colenso on 15 December 1899 to Ladysmith's eventual relief on 28 February 1900, Griffith directs his anger towards the senior commanders. Buller, in particular, is roundly condemned. Depicted as dithering and defeatist, the tragic consequences of his decision to ignore the advice of his subordinates and order a frontal assault of Boer positions at Colenso are brought home graphically. Accompanied by a soundtrack of martial music and rifle fire, Griffith intones that, 'not one man crossed the Tugela and lived – at this point the river was 10' deep'.[26] The programme then lingers on Buller's moral collapse in the aftermath of this debacle. As if inviting the viewer to explore the defeated general's inner demons, the camera zooms in for an intense close-up of Buller's face while the script goes through the details of his pessimistic heliograph exchange with White, in which it was suggested that the garrison should look to negotiate the best terms they could with the Boers.

Although the greatest censure is undoubtedly reserved for Buller, other commanders do not get off scot-free. Colonel Long's incompetence in allowing his artillery to be fatally exposed at Colenso is used to reinforce the impression that the army was officered by a corps of bungling reactionaries. Similarly, Brigadier-General Neville Lyttleton is held up by Griffith as a typical example of inept British leadership, but this time through indifference rather than incompetence:

> A Boer commandant named Pretorius addressed General Lyttleton on the battlefield [during a truce on 25 February 1900]: 'You British have had a rough time'. 'A rough time', replied Lyttleton, 'I suppose so, but we are all well paid for it'. 'Great God', said the Boer. Of course, Lyttleton was not telling the whole truth – many of the soldiers were not used to it – and most of them were appallingly paid – 1/– per day before deductions for doing the dying. The General must have temporarily forgotten his men.[27]

The programme concludes with a visual reminder that the relief was a British victory but one gained at too high a cost. With 'Land of Hope and Glory' playing in the background, a picture of Queen Victoria being greeted by rejoicing crowds in London soon fades into a final scene showing Griffith silhouetted against the sunset walking past the graves of Spion Kop.[28]

In its pre-screening advertising, the BBC was at pains to promote the documentary's subjective nature. Listed in the *Radio Times* as 'a personal view of the siege of Ladysmith', this signal about the programme's partisan approach was buttressed by an accompanying human interest piece which stressed that Griffith's enthusiasm for the subject and empathy for the British soldier had

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[26] BBCWAC, T5426/2031, Post Production Script, dated 18 March 1967, p. 5.
[27] BBCWAC, T5426/2031, Post Production Script, dated 18 March 1967, p. 12.
[28] BBCWAC, T5426/2031, Post Production Script, dated 18 March 1967, p. 14.

resulted in a 'very personal narrative'.[29] Although only achieving moderately low viewing figures, just 3.7 per cent of the viewing public, *Soldiers of the Widow* was, nonetheless, received relatively positively.[30] In part, this favourable response seems to have been directly due to, rather than in spite of, Griffith's lack of objectivity. The BBC's audience research department found that viewers were 'particularly impressed by the narrator's sincerity, his knowledge of and dedication to his subject', with one of the survey panel noting that, 'the programme served as an excellent, involved guide to the horror. In general, one would not want a professional actor as such a guide, but Mr Griffith was superb; so clearly a keen student of this period'.[31]

There were some dissenting voices. One viewer informed the BBC that, 'The biased commentary almost ruined the programme for me. I became more and more irritated and less and less interested'.[32] This was an opinion that was shared by the *Daily Telegraph*'s veteran TV critic Marsland Gander. Arguing that Griffith was 'too obviously pro-Boer and unnecessarily sarcastic and unsympathetic towards the British cause', Gander dismissed the programme as nothing more than 'anti-British propaganda'.[33] Yet, in the paper's letters column the following week, Griffith received support from an unlikely quarter. Adam Burnett, secretary of the Royal Overseas League, insisted that the 'programme was not "anti-British" but simply anti certain British attitudes at the time of the Relief of Ladysmith'. 'Mr Griffith was', Burnett continued, 'clearly full of sympathy for the ordinary soldier. His scorn was reserved for the folly of their leaders and for the wrong-headedness of the then Government. Such an attitude is surely no more "anti-British" than that of those who opposed Government action at the time of Suez'.[34] For Burnett, then, there was little to distinguish the militaristic adventuring of 1956 from that of 1899–1902; both smacked equally of imperial hubris.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Stanley Reynolds drew a parallel with an even more recent conflict. *Soldiers of the Widow* was, he claimed, 'more than a mere kick up the Empire's backside. No one could have watched it without thinking of Vietnam and the poor hillbillies, Negroes, and high school drop-outs who are fighting the war for the Rotarians'.[35] Reynolds agreed with Marsland Gander that the documentary was propaganda: 'but propaganda for the humanity of the common man, in this case, the Liverpool, Manchester and Dublin private

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29 *Radio Times*, 25 May 1967, p. 4

30 BBCWAC, TFVR/67/346, BBC Audience Research Barometer of Viewing, 27 May 1967. By way of comparison programmes aired at the same time on BBC1 and ITV received audience shares of 9.8 per cent and 18.6 per cent respectively.

31 BBCWAC, TFVR/67/346, Audience Research Report, 28 June 1967.

32 BBCWAC, TFVR/67/346, Audience Research Report, 28 June 1967.

33 *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1967.

34 *Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 1967.

35 *Guardian*, 29 May 1967.

soldiers who fought in the Boer War'.[36] As such, he argued, Griffith's piece acted as a corrective to the 'stone statues, bronze plaques and civilised placenames' that celebrated the makers of the war.[37]

The comparisons drawn by Burnett and Reynolds to Suez and Vietnam serve as a useful reminder that television programmes do not appear in a vacuum. *Soldiers of the Widow* was broadcast in the wake of a number of books, plays and documentaries produced to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, the most notable of which was the BBC's twenty-six-part series *The Great War*. These commemorative productions buttressed the popular image of war as a futile waste in which a bungling officer class needlessly sacrificed the lives of the nation's youth.[38] Griffith's script captured perfectly this public mood. The BBC audience research report noted that although Griffith made 'no attempt to hide his dislike, anger and despair at the incompetence of British commanders … viewers usually saw no reason to quarrel with him'.[39]

Indeed, in many ways, the South African War, more than the Great War, was better suited to Griffith's stated intention of 'evoking the horrors of war'.[40] With fewer surviving veterans and lacking the emotional intensity borne of the enormous losses of 1914–1918, the conflict against the Boers presented a televisual blank canvass upon which viewers' perceptions and attitudes could be shaped. Even those who had some knowledge of the period seemed prepared to accept Griffith's take on events. 'Please may we have more of these post mortems of British and foreign episodes of folly?' asked one respondent to the BBC's audience research poll: 'It's a good thing to see the story slightly slanted in favour of the Boers – after school history books'.[41]

Sons of the Blood: The Great Boer War 1899–1902 (BBC2, 1972)

In 1967, the *Guardian*'s television critic, Stanley Reynolds, had concluded his glowing review of *Soldiers of the Widow* on a note of concern. Certain that Griffith's foray into television history could have been nothing other than 'a cul-de-sac', he had voiced the fear that the actor would 'now retreat into his own profession leaving the television field to the mundane and merely professional makers of documentaries'.[42] In fact, Reynolds could not have been more wrong.

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36 *Guardian*, 29 May 1967.
37 *Guardian*, 29 May 1967.
38 A. Danchev, 'Bunking and Debunking: The Controversies of the 1960s', in Brian Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 263–288. See also Mark Connelly, 'The Great War, Part 13: The Devil Is Coming', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 22: 1 (2002), pp. 21–28.
39 BBCWAC, TFVR/67/346, Audience Research Report, 28 June 1967.
40 *The Sunday Times*, 21 May 1967.
41 BBCWAC, TFVR/67/346, Audience Research Report, 28 June 1967.
42 *Guardian*, 29 May 1967.

Indeed, in his autobiography, Griffith cited the *Guardian*'s review as the critical factor in his decision to alter his career trajectory. It was, he recalled, only after reading Reynolds's lavish praise that he realised he was 'on the edge of terminating my life as an actor'.[43] Although the transformation was not quite as abrupt as this, as any filmography will reveal, it was nevertheless the case that Griffith did, from the beginning of the 1970s onwards, devote more and more of his time and energy to documentary-making. After writing and presenting a critical study of the life of Cecil Rhodes for the BBC in 1971, he returned the following year to the South African War for what was to be his most ambitious project, a four-part series charting the course of the conflict in its entirety.[44]

The gestation of *Sons of the Blood* was protracted and troubled. Disappointed by the BBC's failure to commission any more work on the back of the critical success of *Soldiers of the Widow*, Griffith looked elsewhere for support, eventually acquiring funding from an independent production company owned by the actor Patrick McGoohan. Although committed to an ambitious project charting the rise and fall of the British Empire, he chose to return to his first love, the war in South Africa, and began the process of recording interviews with veterans from both sides of the fighting. In late 1969, with fourteen hours of film from twenty-four veterans taped, Gordon Watkins, the chief assistant for programme development at the BBC, was approached about the possibility of turning the interviews into a four-part series covering all aspects of the conflict. However, lengthy negotiations over the financial terms of the contract meant that it was not until over a year later that a deal was finally secured.[45]

The difficulties did not end there. A greater stumbling block to the eventual realisation of the project lay with Griffith himself and, in particular, with his passionate commitment to the series and his absolute devotion to the old men he had interviewed. In a memorandum entitled 'How I would like to use the veterans' material and why', he made abundantly clear for Chris Brasher, the head of general features at the BBC, just how significant he considered the work to be:

> Personally, I cannot escape the importance of this material. It is now irreplaceable. I think it is the most important opportunity of my life. I managed, by the skin of my teeth, to get the story of our empire inscribed on film by the men who did the killing. And whatever we may think of that empire today, the truth is that our house is built on the rubble of it and the world is still rocking from the effects of it. I find it surprising that so few people – even in Britain – seem aware of this fact. We British are responsible for monumental crimes and often major moral contributions which are still

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43 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 184.

44 *A Touch of Churchill, a Touch of Hitler: The Life of Cecil Rhodes* (BBC, 1971).

45 Griffith, *Fools Pardon*, pp. 201–205; BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Gordon Watkins to Chris Brasher, 28 January 1971.

> bristling dangerously all around our globe … and few have begun to even swallow our significance, leave alone digest it. And the awful lessons to be learnt for today and tomorrow!
>
> If the above is true, I believe that our only hope of even hearing that extraordinary heart really beat is by listening very carefully to these old warriors. We must give them a *full* hearing for so many reasons.[46]

Such fervour presented the BBC with a dilemma. Gordon Watkins, aware that the success of the enterprise depended on Griffith's 'enthusiasm, both in his to camera pieces and linking passages within the interviews', was anxious that the veterans should not be upstaged.[47] It was they, he insisted, 'who, without doubt, must be the stars of the films'.[48] The BBC thus insisted on tight editing, ensuring that the unmediated, in televisual terms at least, testimony of the veterans made up a large proportion of the on-screen time. Although Griffith was adamant that his narration was needed to turn 'the raw interviews … into a coherent story' and this would require each programme to be a minimum of fifty minutes long, the BBC remained unmoved and eventually four thirty-minute episodes were aired in August 1972.[49]

The series adopted a conventional chronological approach to the conflict. Yet, as one might expect given Griffith's guiding hand, this was no traditional account of imperial adventuring. A clear indication of the tenor of the programme can be found in Griffith's original pitch to Christopher Brasher. Having first been informed that the narrative would need to be divided into four parts, Brasher was provided with an unashamedly partisan breakdown of each episode:

> *First*: Attitudes of Britain on the eve of war – in 1899. And the attitudes of a nation of farmers – the Boers – as they faced the onslaught of the British Empire.
>
> *Second*: The great battles where passionate, puritan farmers fought the regiments of Waterloo and Sebastopol. And how the British lion was smitten from one end of southern Africa to the other.
>
> *Third*: The heroic resistance. We burnt their homes and put their women and children into concentration camps, refugee camps or Burgher camps – call them what you will – where nearly 30,000 died from 'enteric fever' etc. The

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46 BBCWAC, T41/535/1, memorandum, 'How I would like to use the veterans' material and why', Kenneth Griffith to Chris Brasher, undated (emphasis in original).

47 BBCWAC, T41/535/1, memorandum, Gordon Watkins to Chris Brasher, 8 December 1970.

48 BBCWAC, T41/535/1, memorandum, Gordon Watkins to Chris Brasher, 8 December 1970.

49 BBCWAC, T41/535/1,Griffith to Scott, 11 September 1972, p. 11

> Boers finally came to terms – riding in from the high-veldt in their rags having previously smashed their Mausers. With justifiable pride they are called by white South Africans: The Bitter-Enders.
>
> And *Fourth*: The Peace. The world that was forever changed. The responsibility. Who was to blame for the enormous crime? One charitable old Boer 'outstryder' answers the question: 'God; He should never have allowed it to happen'. I would have preferred the opportunity to have kicked Jo Chamberlain, Milner and Rhodes up the arse.[50]

For the viewer, the tone for the whole series was set in the opening sequence. The camera lingers on a few frail old men in uniform before panning away to watch Colonel Lang, the president of the South African War Veterans' Association, read out a brief communiqué from the Queen's Treasurer, Sir Charles Tryon, acknowledging the Association's disbandment as a result of 'old age and physical infirmities'. The scene then cuts to an indignant Griffith who, quivering with righteous fury, tells the viewer: 'I understand Tryon is the assistant to Sir Michael Adeane, secretary to Her Majesty the Queen. And his miserable reply from Buckingham Palace, I presume, is the very last royal response to the warriors of the Empire, upon which the sun never set'.[51] The following episodes continue to grind out a message of stoic and courageous Tommies being betrayed by uncaring and incompetent superiors. The needless suffering of the troops as a result of inept British leadership is brought home graphically. Thus episode two, *You Can't Miss a Man at 800 Yards …!*, focuses on the senior command's failure to adapt to Boer tactics at the battles of Modder River and Spion Kop. As the programme synopsis in the *Radio Times* made clear, the real heroes of the fighting were the rank and filers of both sides: 'But, as their memories of these tragic months reveal, the ordinary soldiers, Boer and British, retained their humanity – and their sense of humour'.[52]

Unsurprisingly, as had been the case with *Soldiers of the Widow*, the BBC was anxious that the series should be differentiated from its usual run of historical documentaries. The billing in the *Radio Times* gave prominence to the fact that the series was a personal interpretation of events and this point was reinforced by an interview with Griffith in the 12–18 August edition of the magazine, in which he decried the BBC's avowed impartiality. 'I've always been fascinated by militant objectivity', he confided to the interviewer, 'though it's not a failing of mine. I hope I never sink so low as to be objective about anything myself. I

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[50] BBCWAC, T41/535/1, memorandum, 'How I would like to use the veterans' material and why', Kenneth Griffith to Chris Brasher, undated. *Outstryder* is the Afrikaans word for a veteran of the South African War from the Boer side.

[51] Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, pp. 204–205.

[52] *Radio Times*, 5–11 August 1972, p. 37.

do wish the BBC would stick its neck out a bit more'.[53] Yet, the Corporation was also keen to establish Griffith's credentials as an expert. A promotional piece for the documentary, which again appeared in the *Radio Times*, featured his extensive collection of South African War memorabilia.[54] *Sons of the Blood* may just be one man's view of the conflict, BBC viewers were being told, but it was nonetheless, a fully informed one.

Despite this attempt at reassurance, the partisan nature of Griffith's script did receive criticism. A number of viewers were angered by what they felt was the programme's anti-Empire bias. 'I am getting rather sick of all this British breast-beating' was how one respondent to the BBC's audience research survey put it.[55] Another viewer, W. G. Webber of Bristol, was equally concerned that it seemed to be 'fashionable nowadays to mock at the Empire and everything associated with it', and called on Griffith to 'study an impartial history of the time so he would see that all the faults do not lie with us'. Interestingly, Webber went on to support his argument by raising the issue of unprovoked Boer aggression through the invasion of Natal and the Cape Colony, a justification for British action that had featured in many of the dedication addresses at the unveiling of war memorials in the immediate aftermath of the fighting.[56]

Within the ranks of the BBC there was similar unease that the programme had strayed too far into polemic. Reviewing episode three, which had dealt with the guerrilla stage of the war, the Controller of Programme Schedules questioned whether what had been aired should have been labelled a documentary. Likening Griffith 'to a psychopath splitting spleen [sic] all over the screen', he said he 'would have preferred [the series] to have been presented as one disturbed man's view of the Boer War'.[57] Robin Scott, the Controller of BBC2, although more restrained in his language, was equally uncertain that the right note had been struck. 'I felt', he told Griffith in a letter nominally thanking him for his efforts, 'on some occasions more than others, that you could have allowed the facts and the reminiscences to speak for themselves without drawing personal conclusions or philosophising on the rights and wrongs of the whole episode in our history'.[58] Even Huw Wheldon, the BBC's managing director and a long-time champion of Griffith, was forced to admit to some reservations: 'I have always liked [Griffith] enormously and have always admired him as a narrator.

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53 *Radio Times*, 12–18 August 1972, p. 5.
54 *Radio Times*, 29 July–4 August 1972, pp. 6–7.
55 BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972.
56 *Radio Times*, 9–15 September 1972, p. 64.
57 BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Television Weekly Programme Review, 23 August 1972.
58 BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Robin Scott to Kenneth Griffith, 1 September 1972.

What I distrust is his moralising. I do not feel that he is in a position to lay down precepts on moral philosophy with any authority'.[59]

Griffith, as one would expect, refuted outright such accusations. Having been asked to act as 'link-man', he told Scott in reply to his criticism, he was obligated to present the truth as he saw it. 'Since it was me in vision', he argued, 'I was there for what I stand for'.[60] This line of reasoning received support in the television reviews of the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*. For both papers, the success of *Sons of the Blood* lay not in its merits as academic history but rather in the drawing power of Griffith's passion and prejudice. The *Telegraph* attributed the fascination of the series to Griffith's 'obvious love-hate attitude to the Imperial past',[61] while Barry Norman of *The Times* positively revelled in the brazen partiality of the whole exercise. 'Whether it stands up as history or not I am unable to say', he told the paper's readers after the first episode, 'having no qualifications as an historian; but the man is quite magnificently and enjoyably biased'.[62]

Although Griffith's narration undoubtedly divided critical opinion, where there does seem to have been unanimity is in the positive response to the eye-witness testimony. Gordon Watkins, who as co-producer on the BBC's 1964 Great War documentary had worked closely with a number of war veterans, felt that the key to the success of *Sons of the Blood* lay in the interviews with the twenty-four old men who had served in the Boer and British ranks during the conflict.[63] Certainly all the evidence, from viewers as well as professional critics, would appear to support this contention.[64] In part, this popular acclaim can be attributed to the general upsurge in interest in this period for the stories and experiences of the ordinary man, for the history of everyday life. This was especially true for military history. The BBC's seminal 1964 documentary, *The Great War*, had established in the viewing public's mind the eyewitness account as an indispensable feature of television history.[65] The audience research report, commissioned by the BBC after the first episode of *Sons of the Blood* had been broadcast, confirmed this fact. The authors noted that there was general agreement within the viewing panel that the veterans' interviews had been

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[59] BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Huw Wheldon to Head of Programme Purchasing, 30 January 1973; Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, pp. 184–189.

[60] BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Griffith to Scott, 11 September 1972, p. 11.

[61] *Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1972.

[62] *The Times*, 4 August 1972

[63] BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Television Weekly Programme Review, 23 August 1972.

[64] BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972; *Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1972; *The Times*, 4 August 1972; *Sun*, 4 August 1972; *Radio Times*, 9–15 September 1972, p. 64.

[65] Hanna, *The Great War*, pp. 70–72.

central to the programme's success, 'because history is about people, and these were real people with something to say'.[66]

Yet, not only were viewers understandably captivated by seeing men in their nineties and above vividly recalling an event that two world wars had appeared to consign to a remote past, but they were also inclined to accept what was being said as the truth. Samuel Hynes, in his study of soldiers' frontline experience in the twentieth century, has observed that it is the memories of veterans that give war a human dimension that the objectivity of the professional historian or documentary-maker is unable to capture. 'If we would understand', he has argued, 'what war is like, and how it feels, we must turn away from history and its numbers, and seek the reality in the personal testimonies of the men who were there'.[67] Certainly the audience research report for *Sons of Blood* would appear to support Hynes's line of argument. By adding 'the substance of first-hand experience to Kenneth Griffith's narrative', it pointed out, 'the viewers' esteem for the informative qualities of the programme had been upheld'.[68] Indeed, the final paragraph of the report indicated that, for the majority of viewers, this 'esteem' extended beyond the recollections of the old men: 65 per cent of the viewing panel thought that Griffith's linking commentary helped to make the story clear and 68 per cent felt that his personality and opinions were given the right degree of prominence.[69] The report's authors attributed this high satisfaction rating to the nexus between Kenneth Griffith and the veterans. It was, they concluded, the obvious affection of the interviewer for his interviewees that added credibility to an otherwise contentious script.

In many ways, then, *Sons of the Blood* built on the questions raised in *Soldiers of the Widow*. Extensive use of veterans' testimony buttressed Griffith's anti-imperial slant. Although his insistence that 'because these old men were *there* they are too old to shovel any cant', falls foul of what Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have called the 'tyranny of witness' – the assumption that only those who have experienced war have 'the moral, generational and historical right to discuss it' – it was, nonetheless, an assertion that seems to have resonated with large sections of the programme's audience.[70] Of the vast correspondence that the BBC received about the series, only one letter in every twenty-five took issue with Griffith's 'disapproval of Empire'.[71] For

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66 BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972.

67 Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. xii–xiii.

68 BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972.

69 BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972.

70 BBCWAC, T41/535/1,Griffith to Scott, 8 August 1971 (emphasis in the original); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War* (London: Profile, 2000), pp. 37–39.

71 *Sun*, 17 August 1972.

the majority, the general feeling was that the programme had provided a 'new slant on events that were now old history'.[72] As one viewer told the *Radio Times*:

> [Griffith's] evocative and compassionate television … and his keen dramatic irony renders both the moment and the sweep of history extraordinarily vivid, and his piercing irony, biting down to the bedrock of character and the profound ambivalences of historical movements, is always at the service of a scepticism as compassionate as it is ruthless.[73]

For the centenary of the outbreak of the South African War, Griffith was to employ the piercing irony of his dramatic talents to their fullest extent as he undertook to produce for the BBC one final television history of the conflict.

Against the Empire: The Boer War (BBC2, 1999)

To mark the centenary anniversary of the South African War, Griffith was commissioned by the BBC to write and present a two-part documentary on the conflict. Although well into his late seventies, he approached the project with characteristic vigour. Interweaving interview clips culled from the *Sons of the Blood* archive with dramatic reconstructions of events in which the presenter impersonated key personalities (including, bizarrely, Emily Hobhouse), the programme saw Griffith at his impassioned best.

Once again, at the heart of his interpretation of the war was a desire to present the human cost of the conflict as the outcome of rapacious Randlords, duplicitous politicians and inept army commanders. A constant thread throughout the documentary was the causal significance of the newly discovered mineral wealth of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Having outlined at length, in the first episode, the economic imperatives that he felt underpinned British diplomacy in the lead up to hostilities, Griffith ensured that his audience was not allowed to lose sight of such materialistic motives once the fighting started. A breathless account of the preparations for the battle of Spion Kop at the beginning of the second episode was interrupted to reacquaint viewers with the moral bankruptcy of British war aims: 'I think at this point we should remind ourselves here that the gold that was under Johannesburg was a long distance away. I think at this point we should still remind ourselves of the awful businessmen and politicians who had demanded that gold and that power – Cecil Rhodes, Milner, Chamberlain'.[74] A veteran's recollection of losing five close friends during the ensuing fighting was greeted with the mordant response: 'I hope the gold under Johannesburg was worth the effort'. An acerbic aside made abundantly clear the real reason for British

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[72] BBCWAC, TFVR/72/462, Audience Research Report, 8 September 1972.
[73] *Radio Times*, 9–15 September 1972, p. 64.
[74] *Against the Empire: The Boer War*, Part 2, 'Why Are We Here?' (BBC2, 1999).

reluctance to negotiate with the Boers after the fall of Bloemfontein: 'and, of course, the Johannesburg gold was considerably nearer'. The Boers may have been defeated, Griffith predictably concluded, but this was a hollow victory: 'the British Empire had won at a ghastly cost in human suffering and all for British material profit'.[75]

The British commanders in South Africa received similarly damning treatment. Sir Redvers Buller was 'inflexible and ill-informed' in his preparations for Spion Kop, while Lord Methuen was 'innocently confident' as he attempted to relieve Kimberley. But the greatest opprobrium was reserved for Lords Roberts and Kitchener. It was, viewers were told, these two senior officers who, as commanders-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa from the beginning of 1900 onwards, were responsible for the counter-insurgency policies that resulted in the 'virtual genocide' of the Afrikaner people. 'The Boers', Griffith lectured the audience, 'had great moral heroes and we had none'.[76]

Yet, as the script ground out a message of British imperial hubris, it was made clear that the rank and file of the British army should be excused blame. Unfailingly introduced by Griffith as 'my friend', a succession of elderly British veterans attested to their revulsion at the tactics they were ordered to adopt and their powerlessness to resist in the face of a rigid military authority. Oppressed by the 'social class arrangements of imperialism', these men were presented as being as much the victims of the war as were the Boers.[77] After one veteran's recollection that the pay of the dead was docked the price of the blanket their body was wrapped in, an indignant Griffith rejoined, 'That doesn't speak too well for England does it?'[78] Neither the high level of middle-class volunteerism in the aftermath of Black Week nor the debate over working-class engagement with the imperial mission was made reference to in the script.[79] This was colonial warfare reshaped for the political agenda of the late twentieth century; a history of the 'ignored or suppressed'.[80]

Despite the overtly polemical nature of Griffith's script, *Against the Empire* was a critical success. Although virtually all reviewers noted the anti-imperial agenda that underpinned the programme, few if any chose to disagree with the views being perpetuated. Andrew Billen in the *New Statesman* described

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75 *Against the Empire: The Boer War*, Part 2, 'Why Are We Here?' (BBC2, 1999).
76 *Against the Empire: The Boer War*, Part 2, 'Why Are We Here?' (BBC2, 1999).
77 *Against the Empire: The Boer War*, Part 2, 'Why Are We Here?' (BBC2, 1999).
78 *Against the Empire: The Boer War*, Part 2, 'Why Are We Here?' (BBC2, 1999).
79 Blanch, 'British Society and the War', in Warwick (ed.), *The South African War*, pp. 210–230; Miller, *Volunteers on the Veld*; Price, *An Imperial War*; S. Surridge, '"All You Soldiers Are What We Call Pro-Boer": The Military Critique of the South African Wars 1899–1902', *History*, 82 (1997), pp. 582–600; Clare Griffiths, 'Questioning the Abstract Morality of War: The Use and Abuse of Imperial Rhetoric in Soldiers' Letters during the Second South African War, 1899–1902', unpublished MA dissertation (University of Sheffield, 2009).
80 Griffith, *Fool's Pardon*, p. 184.

the series as a 'two part, anti-British rant', but concluded that, 'Still, the hyper Griffith had a good war, in as much as he made vivid, morally involving television out of it'.[81] Paul Hoggart from *The Times* took a similar line. Griffith might be 'extraordinarily one-sided', he told the paper's readers, but that didn't stop him being 'clearly right that a greedy, conniving British oligarchy provoked the war to seize the Transvaal gold mines'.[82] It was, argued Christopher Dunkley, *Arts* magazines' TV critic, Griffith's power as a performer that accounted for this willingness to accept such a 'powerfully opinionated version of events'. 'Griffith', he wrote, 'is like some Byronic storyteller from the depths of time, posing by the camp fire and not just telling the tale, but captivating his audience by drawing them in to his enactment of the entire saga'.[83]

Yet, Dunkley's review also hinted at another reason why Griffith's proselytising resonated with the late twentieth-century viewing public. 'What emerges most powerfully from the series', the piece concluded:

> is the contrast between the confidence, indeed arrogance, of the British concerning their imperial cause in 1899 and the complete absence of such confidence in 1999. You begin to wonder whether – barring the Second World War with the attempted annihilation of the Jews – there is any war that posterity will not eventually come to see as wrong-headed.[84]

For Dunkley, therefore, the essential truth of *Against the Empire* lay not in its precise interpretation of the conflict between Briton and Boer but rather in the wider message it disseminated about the futility of war in general. Here the programme was neatly reflecting the contemporary public mood. To a post-imperial, post-Cold War Britain, the wars of a century ago with their high rhetoric of 'honour', 'sacrifice' and 'glory' seemed to a public schooled in the 'good' fight against Nazism to epitomise waste and stupidity.[85]

To a large extent this jaundiced modern memory of the conflicts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had been established by studies of the First World War. A glut of populist books, films and television documentaries since the war had been rediscovered in the 1960s had led to the construction of what has been termed the 'Myth of the War'.[86] By the 1990s this 'myth', revolving around heartlessly incompetent generals sending naively idealistic soldiers to pointless deaths, had become firmly embedded in the public

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81 *New Statesman*, 4 October 1999.
82 *The Times*, 2 October 1999.
83 *Arts*, 2 October 1999, p. 7.
84 *Arts*, 2 October 1999, p. 7.
85 Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Reality* (London: Headline, 2001), p. xix.
86 Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990), pp. ix–x; Todman, *The Great War*, pp. xi–xii.

consciousness. Thus, it was hardly surprising that Griffith's account of the sacrifice and suffering of British troops on the veldt found a receptive audience. Indeed, even though *Against the Empire* made no attempt at comparative history, the parallels between the two wars did not go unnoticed by some reviewers. For Christopher Matthew of the *Daily Mail*, 'The slaughter of the young men of the Highland Brigade on Spion Kop on January 24th 1900, thanks entirely to dithering leadership, was a horrifying preview of a far greater slaughter to come'.[87] Similarly, for Simon Rockall of the *Bath Chronicle*, the shift from the jubilant send-offs of 1899 to shameful operations of Kitchener's counter-insurgency held echoes of the death of the spirit of 1914 on the battlefields of the Somme in 1916.[88] To Christopher Dunkley of *Arts* magazine, Griffith had shown that it was the South African War as much as the Great War that had ushered in the modern age. After the deaths of so many British soldiers at the hands of the Boers, what had become, he rhetorically asked his readers, of 'the idea of the war that is honourable, glorious, fought to Queensbury rules?' It had, he continued, been revealed for what it really was: 'A myth, intended to keep young men flocking to the colours and singing patriotic songs before dying in agony on foreign mountainsides'.[89]

For the viewing public, *Against the Empire* had firmly established the South African War in the same mould as the Great War. Fuller's claim that the war had been conducted in a time-honoured chivalrous code, that it had been the last of the gentlemen's wars, had been revealed by the series to be nothing more than outdated imperialistic nostalgia. For late twentieth-century Britain, the imperial rhetoric that underscored *The Times History*, or the messages about king and county, duty and honour, that lay at the heart of memorial iconography, no longer legitimised the human costs, on both sides, of the war. In the closing shot of *Against the Empire*, Griffith, walking away from the National Women's Memorial in Bloemfontein where the ashes of Emily Hobhouse are interred, pauses to remind the audience of the true significance of the war in South Africa: 'Oh, and incidentally, I repeat that the Second Anglo-Boer War was the beginning of the end of the British Empire'. It would appear that such an observation no longer elicited any sense of regret.

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87 *Daily Mail*, 24 September 1999.
88 *Bath Chronicle*, 1 October 1999.
89 *Arts*, 2 October 1999, p. 2.