

Mid-Month Visit – January 2025

My mid-month visit 'newsletter' in January 2023 featured the village of Balmoral, and having recently driven the road that takes one past the village, and having stopped there for breakfast, the time is right to remind readers of the stop that is so often by-passed. On the opposite side of the N4, travelling from Pretoria to Belfast is the Kusile Power Station, which attracts all the attention. Kusile looks like a 'space station' and as such, tourists travelling the road are more interested in the facts surrounding this project, than minor incidents which happened across the road during the years 1900 to 1902.

Kusile Power Station is a coal-fired power plant consisting of six generating units with an eventual nameplate capacity of 800 MW each, meaning the total installed capacity would be 4 800 MW. Construction started in August 2008, and it was expected to take six years to complete, however, deficient project management, corruption, labour disputes, vandalism and absenteeism resulted in low operational efficiency and reliability which periodically stalled the generation of electricity 15 years after its construction began, and Kusile is still not fully operational. In November 2019 South African investigative journalist Pieter-Louis Myburgh published an article in the Daily Maverick detailing an alleged slush fund corruption scandal involving Eskom executives and at least four contractors. The scandal involved contracts worth a combined R10 billion resulting in an estimated R75 million being lost due to irregular activities. By the time of the publication of Myburgh's article the construction of Kusile was five years past its original completion date and an estimated R80 billion (equivalent to US\$5.4 billion) over budget. (Source: Google)

This however is not an update on Kusile, so enough of that.

Balmoral was established in 1894 and the station which was built there at the time became a strategic stop due to the availability of coal (from a nearby mine) and water – two essential components for steam engines of the time. After the Battle of Diamond Hill, the Boer leaders held a council-of-war in the village to decide on the way forward. The book 'The War Reporter' by J.E.H. Grobler records (page 79) – *"The defensive or passive tactics employed earlier on, which left the initiative in the hands of the enemy, will be completely abandoned. In their stead the Boers will employ active tactics, attacking the enemy as often as possible and especially attempting to disrupt their communication routes. Small groups of Boers will act independently of each other, forcing the Khaki commanders to divide their own forces and make them more vulnerable."*



Picture: The location of the original Balmoral Station



The book 'Jan Smuts – Memoirs of the Boer War' edited by SB Spies and Gail Nattrass records (page 211) – *"General Louis Botha established his headquarters at Balmoral, between Machadadorp and Pretoria, on the Delagoa Bay railway after his retreat from the Battle of Diamond Hill. At Balmoral Botha and his officers planned the redistribution of Boer forces"*. The book makes interesting reading on what happened at that council-of-war, but a decision that was made, changed Jan Smuts from being an 'administration' genius, to a military genius. The book further records (page 77) – *"The second difficulty was that de la Rey, who felt the responsibility of the work he was going to do, did not wish to go alone but wanted me to be associated with him. We had been old friends; he knew that I was in favour of all measures for the energetic assertion of our authority and prosecution of the war; and my high civil authority would make the burghers acquiesce in acts and measures which, if they came from him alone, were likely to be challenged to the detriment of the cause. I was myself willing and indeed anxious to accompany him."*

And so, Jan Smuts spent a few months helping de la Rey get those who had laid down arms, to take them up again for the cause, and also to reorganise the top structure of the commandos in the Western Transvaal into a force that respected de la Rey without question. Smuts, from joining de la Rey in July/August 1900, led a group of Boers to attack the gun position at Buffelspoort early in December 1900, and then to be an integral part of the Battle of Nooitgedacht on 13 December 1900. Four months of training under de la Rey, plus experience gained during the rest of the Boer War made Jan Smuts, Field Marshal Jan Smuts, the military genius he turned out to be.



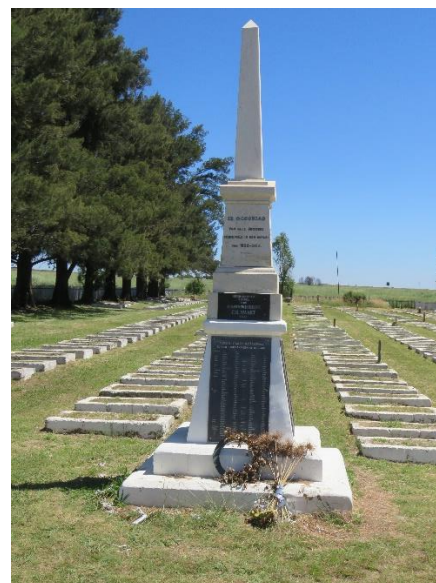
Picture: Field Marshal Jan Smuts

Before getting off the subject of Jan Smuts, the book, referred to above, records (pages 18 & 19) – *"Smuts remains a man difficult to define. It has been said of him that it demanded both extreme sophistication and deep simplicity to follow the operation of his mind. He achieved world power and significance but remained essentially a humble man. He had followers who remained fiercely loyal to him all his life, while others became deeply antagonistic. Of his intellectual ability there can be no doubt. Articled clerks to whom he lectured while he lived in Johannesburg, described him as a brilliant teacher. He could easily have become a professor of law. His talents extended to many other fields as well. In 1936, Albert Einstein said of Smuts that he was one of only eleven men in the world who conceptually understood his theories of relativity; in 1970, Lord Todd, the Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, where Smuts had studied, said that in the 500 years of the College's history, of all its members, past and present, three had been truly outstanding: John Milton, Charles Darwin and Jan Smuts."*



Our tour of Mpumalanga stops at Balmoral for breakfast at the Sergeant Pepper's Restaurant, which is just off the N4, next to the Concentration Camp which was established during the War.

Because of its strategic location on the railway line, once the village had been occupied, the East Kent Regiment were given the responsibility of protecting the railway line on both sides of Balmoral. On 19 November 1900, Ben Viljoen and his commando attacked the garrison, and before calling off the attack, the Boers had severely disrupted the communication links at the station.



Picture: The Memorial and Cemetery at the site of the Balmoral Concentration Camp

Ben Viljoen, in his book 'My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War' records (pages 156 & 157) – *"At eight o'clock we were forced to fall back, for although we had destroyed the railway and telegraphic communications in several places over-night, the latter were repaired in the afternoon, and the enemy's reinforcements poured in from Pretoria as well as from Middelburg. I observed all this through my glass from the position I had taken up on a high point near the Douglas coal mine."*

Ten days after this battle, Ben Viljoen set up a defensive position to oppose the British force under the command of General Paget, who had been sent from Pretoria to confront Viljoen. This was the Battle of Rhenosterkop (also part of one of our tours), a battle which has also, together with Bergendal, been described as the last set piece battle of the war.

Balmoral is a hidden gem as a break from the trip to the Kruger Park. It is also of huge interest to any Boer War enthusiast as it was the catalyst for much of what happened in the Transvaal during the guerrilla phase of the war ... and the Sergeant Pepper's Restaurant satisfies both these needs.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) for regular updates and news.

Allan Gordon