

ON LINE *opinion* - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

A forgotten hero

By Peter Curson

Posted Tuesday, 22 January 2013

Today who remembers Edward Presgrave?

Largely his name remains totally forgotten, long ago consigned to the dustbin of colonial history. But here we have a real Australian hero who cries out to be remembered and honoured.

Presgrave was a young adventurer who at the age of 18 made his own way to South Africa and enlisted in two irregular regiments to fight in the Boer War. After 16 months service in Brabant's Horse and with the Marquis of Tullibardine's Scottish Horse, like many discharged Australians, he elected to stay on in South Africa, drifting around the colony until he eventually made his way up to the town of Uppington in the Northern part of the Cape.

It was here amidst a vast expanse of sand covered dunes, sandy plains and sparse grasslands that he was destined to make a name for himself and to be written forever into the history of what was then German South West Africa, now Namibia.

Presgrave would spend four years living in and around this small remote town, trading in horses and livestock, sometimes legitimately, sometimes times not. During this time the neighbouring colony of German South West Africa was thrown into turmoil as first the Herero tribes rose in revolt against their German overlords and then the Nama tribes in the south joined them in 1904.

The Herero and Nama uprisings against the Germans were not minor affairs, By the time the Germans had declared the war over in 1906, the death toll had exceeded that of the Boer War.

In a little over three years 80,000 Herero and Nama had been killed as well as more than 1,500 Germans.

As in all wars disease played an important part. More than 14,000 Germans suffered from infectious disease, including as many as 5,000 with typhus and 4,000 with acute enteritis.

For the Herero and Nama nations the war was a disaster as was the aftermath when thousands were confined in concentration and work camps where the death toll was appallingly high from malnutrition, scurvy, physical abuse and medical experimentation. The camps also contained another terror for the Herero and Nama. Many of those who died had their skulls and skeletons scrubbed clean and packed off to German universities and scientific organisations for anatomical research designed to demonstrate the differences between the 'lesser' races and the civilised races of Europe. For some it was a forerunner of what was to come in Europe 30 years later.

Many women were forced into prostitution or forcibly raped, and concubage was widespread.

After the war the Herero and Nama were destined for a life of virtual slave labour, denied the right to own land or livestock or move around the colony at will, and forced to carry ID tags. It was a disaster to end all disasters and the effects would be felt for generations to come.

It was in such an environment that Edward Presgrave found himself at the beginning of 1905 and it was an environment which brought him into close contact with Jakob Morengo.

Jakob Morengo was without doubt one of the real heroes of the struggle against the Germans after 1904. Called the Black De Wet by a Cape Town newspaper for his daring guerrilla raids, with only a handful of supporters he tied down more than 12,000 well equipped German troops for over two years.

His success was based on an intimate knowledge of the local mountain and gorge environment and a policy of lightning raids and cleverly organised hit and run tactics. Edward Presgrave enters the official records towards the latter days of Morengo's long guerrilla campaign against the Germans.

Working in and around the town of Upington Presgrave was regularly traversing the Cape/German border to the north of the town. It was here that his destiny would ultimately be determined and it was here that he would ally himself to Morengo's epic struggle against the Germans.

There is evidence to suggest that Presgrave went and lived with Morengo and his supporters in the rugged Karasberg Mountains in the early part of 1905. There is a reference to him taking photographs of Morengo's laager and supporters but regrettably none seem to have survived. He also appears to have acted as a "secretary" and advisor to Morengo helping maintain relationships between Morengo and local settler families on the British side of the border.

Why Presgrave allied himself to Morengo is not known perhaps it was a search for adventure, the thrill of the frontier, support for the underdog, or just for economic gain. Quite possibly it may well have been some combination of all of these. Whatever it was during 1905 and possibly earlier, Edward Presgrave was actively supporting Jakob Morengo and his supporters, supplying them with arms, ammunition, food and livestock. In mid 1905 he was also actively involved with Morengo in three major encounters with German forces.

In late September 1905, Presgrave was lured across the German border by two Boers on the pretext of buying some cattle. Once across the border the Boers attempted to capture him and in the ensuing melee Presgrave was shot and left for dead amidst the sand dunes. The next morning a German patrol found him and delivered the coup de grace.

There is little doubt that the Germans had long harboured concerns about Presgrave's support for the rebels for some time and had organised for the two Boers to attempt to capture him. At its height Presgrave's death at German hands caused a diplomatic incident marked by a flow of cables, despatches and official reports between London, Berlin, Cape Town and Windhoek.

Believing him to have been unlawfully murdered the Cape Government pressed the British Colonial and Foreign Offices to pursue the case with the German Government. In addition, Presgrave's mother in Sydney managed to get the Governor of NSW to forward a petition on her behalf to the British Colonial Office calling for the German Government to pay compensation for what she termed the unlawful killing of her son.

For almost two years the 'Presgrave Affair' as it became known, rumbled on until the British Government decided to wash its hands of the matter and accept the German defence that Presgrave was trespassing in German territory and actively supporting the rebels. Interestingly, only then did the British Colonial Office decide to formally inform the Australian Government.

For Edward Presgrave it was a very short life but in only a handful of years he managed to leave an important legacy. He was a young Australian who embraced a cause and struggled against overwhelming odds without thought of personal risk. He should not be forgotten.

Peter Curson's book on Edward Presgrave, *Border Conflicts in a German African Colony: Jakob Morengo and the Untold Tragedy of Edward Presgrave* was published in the UK a couple of months ago.

Peter Curson is Professor of Population and Security at the Centre for International Security Studies, The University of Sydney; and Emeritus Professor of Medical Geography, Macquarie University.

© The National Forum and contributors 1999-2015. All rights reserved.