



PLATE 252 *Colonel Baden-Powell wearing an American Stetson in 1896 in Matabeleland, the hat which became the model for the Boy Scouts in 1908. Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West Show', touring England in 1887, had made an impression on him, and he collected Frederick Remington's celebrated sketches of cowboy life. In 1901 he chose the Stetson for the South African Constabulary's uniform. The hat's trade name, 'Boss of the Plains', was seen as a play on 'B-P' by some senior officers, who suspected that this was why he favoured it.*

BADEN-POWELL AT MAFEKING



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On 30 September 1899 Colonel Robert Baden-Powell moved his headquarters to Mafeking and took up residence there. By then, his local intelligence sources had indicated that Boer forces estimated at between six and nine thousand were closing in on the town. During the night of 7 October Baden-Powell's worst fears were confirmed, when he himself, with a junior officer, crept across the veld and saw two large enemy laagers containing two hundred wagons.¹ That their dapper, slouch-hatted little colonel should have performed this risky duty in person would not have surprised his base commandant Colonel Courtenay Vyvyan, or the commander of the town's western defences, Major Alick Godley. Both had been in Rhodesia during the Matabele uprising of 1896, where Baden-Powell, besides being chief staff officer, had worked with the scouts of the advance guard to the main forces, and, later, had commanded a flying column hunting down rebels in the remote north-eastern region. His reputation as an experienced scout also rested on the books he had written on that subject, the latest – *Aids to Scouting for N.C.O.s and Men* – having just arrived from his publisher in galley-proof form. Waiting for the Boers to cut off Mafeking from the outside world, the garrison was becoming increasingly tense. 'We are in such a jumpy state', admitted Godley, 'that whenever anybody shuts the lid of a

box, we think it is a Boer.² Far away in Cape Town, the high commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, held out little hope for Baden-Powell and 'his plucky officers'. In London, the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, was equally pessimistic. That the town would be lost within a week or two seemed the likeliest outcome.³

What of Baden-Powell himself? How did he cope with the strains of command as the moment of truth drew closer? A week before the siege started, he had taken out the Protectorate Regiment – a body of mounted civilian volunteers raised by him in Bulawayo, and now expected to defend Mafeking – and ordered them to stage a mock attack on an enemy squadron represented by a small detachment of British South Africa Police. Godley was dismayed that Baden-Powell became 'fussed and worried' on seeing how slow and unresponsive to commands the regiment was in the field. B-P was badly shaken because he believed that, unless

his mounted part-timers were going to be able to dart out and deliver 'kicks' to the Boers, the enemy would not respect the garrison's fighting spirit, and would therefore feel confident enough to storm the town at once. So B-P ticked off Lieutenant-Colonel Hore, the regiment's commanding officer, over his men's shortcomings. But this, according to Godley, only made Hore 'afraid to take the smallest responsibility, and more hopeless than ever'. 'He [Baden-Powell] appears to expect us to work like a trained cavalry regiment', complained Godley, knowing how unfair this was, since most of the men had only just learned to ride and were poor shots.⁴ But Godley was unaware of the full irony of his commanding officer's present position.



PLATE 253 *Baden-Powell recruiting and training troops in Bulawayo in August 1899.*

PLATE 254 *The Protectorate Regiment on parade outside Mafeking before the siege started.*



For the past decade, Baden-Powell had worked incredibly hard to influence the right people so that he could win promotion. Most of the time, it had been more a matter of survival than ambition. Lacking a private income, he had needed to win rapid and regular advances in rank in order to have a large enough salary to meet his mess bills and other cavalry expenses. Even so, he had been obliged to serve almost his entire career abroad, either in India or Africa, solely to keep his expenditure at affordable levels; his lack of funds had brought him close to resigning whenever his regiment was briefly stationed in Britain, with the inevitable increase in costs. Eventually, Baden-Powell had faced a stark choice: either he would have to get himself selected by the War Office for a career-enhancing job in one of Britain's colonial 'little wars', or leave the army. He tried *everything and anything* to catch the eyes of men with influence: acting in well-publicized amateur theatricals (he was a talented actor) to get his name known in fashionable hill-stations like Simla, where senior officers in India spent the summer; writing books on military and sporting subjects to impress carefully targeted staff officers; angling to be chosen to escort members of the royal family on pigsticking expeditions when they visited India.

To get himself noticed, B-P even attended foreign military manoeuvres, in a private capacity and at his own expense, so he could send impressive-sounding reports to the War Office. He also utilized his considerable talents as an artist and freelance journalist to sell sketches and articles to periodicals and magazines, such as the *Graphic* and *Black & White* – both popular with serving officers. More remarkable still, as a mere captain, he designed a quick-release harness for carriage-mounted machine-guns in the field, and arranged to demonstrate its effectiveness to the commander-in-chief, Lord Wolseley, at Aldershot. It was to be this final piece of desperate ingenuity that would prove crucially helpful to his future prospects.⁵

Baden-Powell's hugely ambitious widowed mother, Henrietta Grace, had



PLATE 255 *A talented actor since his schooldays, Baden-Powell's theatrical successes in India made him well-known throughout the army in the subcontinent. Playing the leading comic role in a Simla Amateur Dramatic Club production of The Geisha in 1897, he could have counted on the governor-general and the commander-in-chief being in the audience.*



PLATE 256 *The Baden-Powells in 1897, with family matriarch, Henrietta Grace, in the centre. Sir George Baden-Powell, MP, is on her right. Warrington, an Admiralty Court QC, is on her left. Major Baden Baden-Powell is standing left. Robert Baden-Powell, standing far right, would not have considered himself, two years before Mafeking, the most promising of the four brothers.*

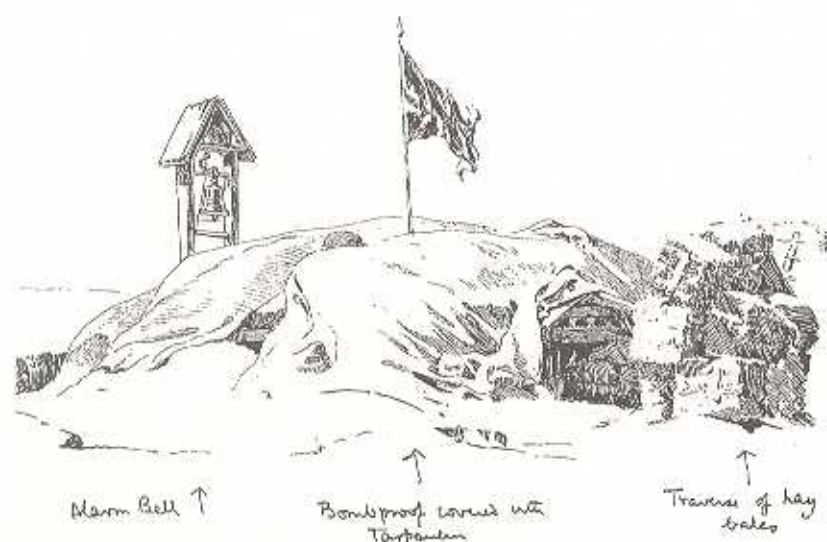
coined a special term to describe her strategy for advancing her four sons' interests. She called it 'grouping', which involved planning personally advantageous events in sequences and groups for maximum effect. Her method had already brought her oldest son, George, a knighthood for his carefully choreographed work on international arbitrations. Its second triumph came in 1895, when Lord Wolseley, who remembered the machine-gun harness, and had just been subjected to some well-timed wooing by Sir George Baden-Powell, offered his younger brother, Robert, command of the native pioneer corps that would form the advance guard of the brigade under orders to annex Ashanti in West Africa to Great Britain. B-P's job was to recruit and lead (with one white subaltern) an eight hundred-strong force of local West Africans, who would be expected to open a path through the jungle and build bridges for the British infantry regiments in their wake. This

scratch pioneer corps did its job very effectively, despite consisting of six separate tribal groups, and Baden-Powell was later judged to have done well enough to be rewarded by Wolseley with the top staff job in Matabeleland: CSO to General Sir Frederick Carrington, to whom he had already been commended by the ubiquitous George.

Promotion and the colonelcy of the 5th Dragoon Guards had followed, and then, in 1899, Wolseley had come up with the greatest challenge of all: the chance to detain a significant number of Boers in Bechuanaland and the northern Transvaal in order to give the military authorities in the Cape Colony and Natal a breathing-space while Britain's main field army was landed and deployed in South Africa. Baden-Powell's written orders had been to adopt a mobile role, but, as he had left Wolseley's room, his lordship had said to him, 'Prepare at Mafeking for being cut off'.⁶ This present assignment clearly had the potential to make or mar Baden-Powell's career in spectacular fashion. With numerical odds of seven to one against him, possessing only obsolete artillery, half-trained men, and a town guard of three hundred local residents, who might choose to surrender as soon as their property was shelled by the Boers, Baden-Powell did not fancy his chances.⁷ In addition, he knew he would have to achieve a large measure of success in welding into a single, well-motivated community a populace containing Cape coloureds, resident Barolong and numerous other tribal groups (he would soon arm about seven hundred and fifty of these blacks and coloureds), as well as Indians, Chinese, British colonials, Germans, Irishmen, Americans, and even some



PLATE 257 *Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Carrington had been a contact of Sir George Baden-Powell since 1885, when commanding the Bechuanaland Police as a mere colonel. When, as a major-general, he was chosen to command the imperial forces sent to suppress the Matabele Rebellion of 1896 to 1897, he owed his appointment to Sir George's influence with Lord Wolseley, the commander-in-chief. In gratitude, Carrington chose Robert Baden-Powell as his chief of staff. Robert's work in Matabeleland would lead to his selection by Wolseley for the special service command that would place him in Mafeking three years later.*



allegedly pro-British Boers. Small wonder that at the very beginning he had betrayed his anxieties under pressure. Ironically, if he had been less successful at 'grouping', he would have been sent to South Africa anyway, in command of his own well-trained cavalry regiment. As colonel of the 5th Dragoon Guards in the field, he could have expected to win acclaim with far less risk of failure attached.

Yet, within days of taking up residence in Mafeking, Baden-Powell had mastered his nerves and would very rarely reveal his true feelings again while the siege lasted. Encouragement, rather than dressings-down, would from now on be his more usual approach to members of the garrison. The ability to exhibit unshakeable composure when under great strain is not given to many. 'Luckily,' he explained to a friend, 'my early play-acting instincts came in useful, and though my mind was in my boots with anxiety – I was able to maintain a grin to reassure those anxious appealing eyes that mutely asked at every turn, "Is it all right?", "Are you sure we can go on?"'⁸ That Baden-Powell succeeded in giving reassurance is beyond doubt. Nurse Craufurd, of the Victoria Hospital, who had to care for many horribly mutilated men, wrote at the time: 'The Colonel is always so cheerful himself, so we feel we must be the same, and we all have such faith in B-P.' The same thought occurred to many others, including the bank clerk, Charles J. Weir: 'One man we have faith in is Colonel Baden-Powell. Everybody has the fullest confidence in him.'⁹ Baden-Powell had a habit of whistling cheerfully and swinging a stick as he walked from place to place in the town, and people used to find this carefree spectacle comforting. He rarely seemed in a hurry, even during enemy bombardments. Vere Stent, one of the town's newspaper

PLATE 258 *Baden-Powell's sketch of the headquarters bombproof. The bombproofs were first excavated, then spanned by train rails, with sleepers put together to support several tons of earth, then covered with tarpaulins to keep out the rain. Nobody would have survived a direct hit from a 94-pound shell from the Boers' large siege gun, but they would have been safe from shell splinters and small projectiles. Through their binoculars, lookouts could see it being primed for firing and would ring the alarm bell before the shell was airborne.*

correspondents, was talking to Baden-Powell when two shells burst not far away. 'The Colonel closed the book which he had been reading, and, marking the place, rose quietly, whistling to himself, as is his habit, and, as a third shell wrecked a couple of outstanding buildings, said, "You had better come inside." I needed no second invitation to seek the shelter of the Headquarters bombproof.'¹⁰

At the age of forty-two, Baden-Powell's physical appearance made him an unlikely man to inspire widespread confidence and admiration. Nurse Craufurd described him, on first sight, as 'a red-haired, freckly, and . . . insignificant-looking man'. Ina Cowan, a local woman, agreed, calling him 'an ideal soldier, though not in looks'.¹¹ But though he was bald, and not very tall, he knew how to make himself look striking in an almost theatrical way, as in the wonderful full-length photographic portrait taken by David Taylor of Mafeking, in which he wore long black suede gauntlets, and sported waxed ends to his moustache. His immaculate uniform, well-polished boots, and rakishly tilted bush hat (which concealed his baldness), all contributed to an air of arch insouciance. In another excellent photograph, he wears an extraordinary cummerbund, fastened with small buckles. Usually he is hatted, quite often wearing a forage cap, as in the famous picture of him typing, out on the veranda of Minchin's law office, where he slept, rested and worked, protected by a barricade of earth-filled boxes. Fear of assassination – he had thirty alleged pro-Boers in gaol – explains the revolver he always kept to hand. The image he habitually projected combined mild eccentricity with toughness and efficiency – the firm jaw, far-seeing eyes and



PLATE 259 *Colonel R.S.S. Baden-Powell, the Hero of Mafeking. This widely distributed photograph was taken by David Taylor of Mafeking.*

PLATE 260 *Baden-Powell in his forage cap, working on the veranda of Minchin's law office.*