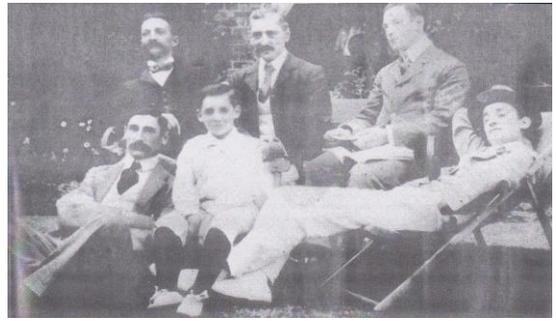


WWI - An Influential South African Family –

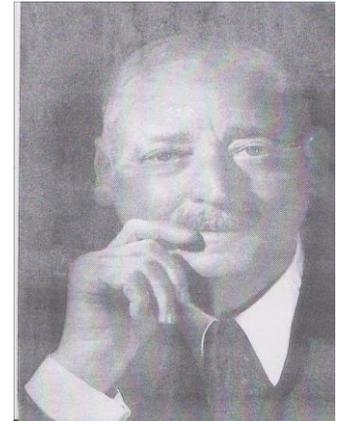
Sir Ernest Oppenheimer & Brothers



The Oppenheimer brothers together at about the turn of the century. *Back from left: Gustav, Bernard and Ernst; front from left: Louis, Bernard's son Michael and Otto.*

Ernest **Oppenheimer** was known as Sir Ernest Oppenheimer internationally, having been knighted by King George V for services rendered in WWI. In South Africa he earned the compliment of the nickname 'Oppie', reflecting his surname and the respect he enjoyed.

Ernest Oppenheimer is quoted as having "increased the wealth of his land by his courage".



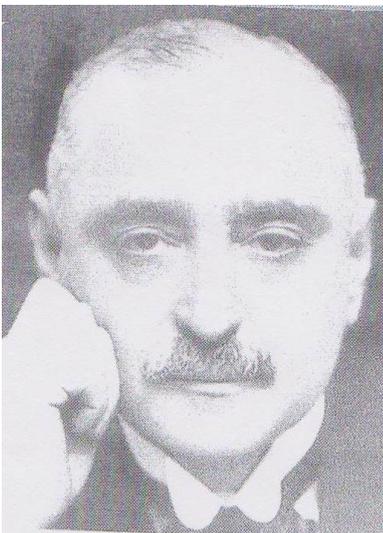
As elected mayor of Kimberley, young Ernest Oppenheimer was much involved with recruiting soldiers, pilots and labourers when war was declared in August 1914. After the sinking of the ship Lusitania by the Germans, anti-German riots broke out in Kimberley, South Africa and a mining mob attacked the mayor because of his German sounding surname. Mr. Oppenheimer resigned and left to join his family in England.

The Mayor of Kimberley, Ernst Oppenheimer, was elected to this office in 1912 & remained in office until his resignation in 1915.

Business decisions convinced him to return to South Africa in 1918. On the return journey Ernest survived when the Colway Castle, on which he was travelling, was torpedoed by a German U-boat. The life-boat in which Ernest escaped drowning, bobbed and shuddered in the high seas but the rowers, of which he was a powerful oar, managed to get clear of the Galway Castle before she capsized and could have pulled them under. Most of the 700 invalided South African soldiers aboard as well as those immigrating to South Africa were left destitute having lost all their possessions. Ernest Oppenheimer supported them all until they were back on their feet.

In 1919 Ernest Oppenheimer was in Europe. General J. C. Smuts, as a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, invited Ernest to attend the great Peace Conference at Versailles, as an observer. The memory of his attendance of that Great Conference was in his own words 'a highlight of his life'. This very special experience hopefully erased the unpleasant experiences at the outbreak of WWI when he was the mayor of Kimberley.

Ernest Oppenheimer then served South Africa as the Member of Parliament for Kimberley for fourteen years. He also became the national secretary of the South African War Memorial Fund. He ensured that every community throughout the Union of South Africa erected a suitable monument to those who had died during WWI. For his contributions to society throughout WWI, Ernest Oppenheimer was knighted in 1921. The citation read: "Honorary Secretary to the South African Memorial Fund. He also took a leading part in the recruiting of both combatants and labourers for various fronts during the war." Ernest Oppenheimer had raised a battalion of volunteers for the Kimberley Regiment and had vigorously canvassed for the Red Cross Society. He had also ensured that every man on active service received a signed Christmas card from the mayor himself in December 1918.



In the same New Year's List of 1921, Sir Ernest's eldest brother **Bernard Oppenheimer** was "created a baronet in view of his huge contribution to the war effort." He had turned his hand to ammunition manufacturing that eventually produced 10 000 shells a day for the guns of the Western Front in France. Staff from the Cape Explosive Works in Somerset West which belonged to De Beers Company (the Oppenheimer's) acted as consultants to the War Office in England on the building of the munitions factories in the United Kingdom. Mr. Kenneth Quinan, the general manager

of The Cape Explosive's Works, Somerset West was wanted, needed and used by the War Office. He designed and built the huge cordite factory at Gretna that eventually produced 800 tons of cordite a week. The Times newspaper reported as follows:

"It would be hard to point at anyone who did more to win the 1914 – 18 war for Britain than K B Quinan." Sir Bernard Oppenheimer also financially rewarded South Africans who had won the VC (Victoria Cross for Valour) and the DSO (Distinguished Service Order).

Otto Oppenheimer, a younger brother of Sires Ernest and Bernard Oppenheimer, had served as a gunner under the command of Maj. Nugent FritzPatrick on the Western Front in the 71st Siege Battery, South African Heavy Artillery, throughout the war. Maj. Nugent FitzPatrick's father, Sir Percy FitzPatrick, is the same person who wrote to the King suggesting the Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance on 11 November at 11:00. Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, as National Secretary of the SA War Memorial Fund attended the unveiling of the Delville Wood Memorial in France taking his 10 year old son, Harry with him.



Harry Oppenheimer then became the last surviving South African to have attended the unveiling ceremony of the Delville Wood Memorial in France in October 1926. He volunteered for military service, anywhere in Africa, during WWII. He served in North Africa with so much valour that he was awarded the most unusual battle honour, the right to wear the famous emblem of the Desert Rats.

Harry & Bridget Oppenheimer on their military wedding day, 6 May 1943. Bridget McCall had done active service on Robben Island during wwll.

Nicky Oppenheimer, son of the late Mr. Harry Oppenheimer, did his compulsory military duty and, after being demobilized, married Strilli Lasch at 11:00 on the 11th of November 1968, it being the 50th commemoration of Armistice Day when the guns of WWI fell silent. Mr. and Mrs. Nicky Oppenheimer will be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary on 11th November 2018.



A unique, "Oppie-touch".

During WWII the members of the Oppenheimer family did much to support the South African war effort but in this short article attention is drawn to their contributions in WWI.

J. C. Abrahams (Tannie Mossie)

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