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WHY THEY FOUGHT: BLACK CAPE COLONISTS AND IMPERIAL WARS, 1899–1918*

By Bill Nasson

This essay starts with the intriguing question sometimes still posed by historians:¹ “Why did black South Africans retain their optimistic faith in the British imperial project, despite its palpably wounding betrayal of their tenuous rights and interests?” And, in a particular speculation, “Why did that attachment hold despite the bruising political consequences of the Anglo-Boer peace at the end of the South African War of 1899–1902, and their subsequent exclusion from the political community forged by the creation of Union in 1910?” Granted, not everyone hung on, but a vigorous, Western-educated minority of pan-ethnic *ama-respectables*, “big Coloureds,” and a coterie of Indian merchants continued to believe in dressing for dinner, especially in the Cape.

For the earlier years of the twentieth century, some obvious part of the answer lies in the lingering perception of Britain as an uplifting Whitehall which might yet recall its proper duties towards those languishing under settler rule. Or, in a complementary image, in the vision of imperial Britain as a mythical monarchy, a sort of bigwig paramount chief to which adolescent urban middle classes and a traditionalist rural leadership felt linked by an imaginative ideology of monarchical responsibility for, and protection of, subject races. Peasant landlessness in the Transkeian Territories and the immiseration of farm laborers in Namaqualand was amply compensated for by the fortifying gaze of Queen Victoria from various classroom and living-room walls, “a great White Queen across the water who made no distinction of race among her subjects, who might be appealed to in case of need.”² It was almost as if, at the mercy of oppressive local

* An initial version of this piece was presented at a conference on “The British World: Diaspora, Culture, and Identity since c.1880,” Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, June 1998. I am grateful for helpful comment received on that occasion.

¹ See Peter Limb’s recent paper, “The Ambiguities of British Empire Loyalty and Identities in the Politics and Journalism of early ANC Leaders,” unpub. conf paper, British World Conference, University of Cape Town, January 2002.

² Vivian Bickford-Smith, “Revisiting Anglicization in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31, 2 (2003), 85. See also Philip Buckner, “The Royal Tour of 1901 and the Construction of an Imperial Identity in South Africa,” *South African Historical Journal* 41 (1999), 342–43.

forces beyond their control, members of the black elite derived some security of aspiration from a sense of trustee belonging or connection with British power.

These dispositions, and the formative role in their construction of the nineteenth-century impact of British missionary liberalism, slave emancipation, the softening of discipline for the Khoi under Ordinance 50, and the nonracial Cape franchise, have recently been handily restated by Christopher Saunders in a concise survey of South African African views of Britain and Empire from the late nineteenth-century until the early 1920s.³ For the polite culture of educated urban professionals and small trading groups, as well as rural chieftaincies associated with Christianity and allied colonial interests, it all boiled down, in a way, to facing contradictions and having to deal with the disquieting ambiguity of a British South Africa. Above all, perhaps, it was tilting the balance between suspicion and trust. For direct British power in the region was the simultaneous paradox of a liberal constitutionalism of “rights” and a moderating protectionism against Boer trespass or bull-necked local white colonial rule, *and* complicity in avaricious colonial aggression and conquest.

Within a context of modernizing ideals and an ambience of political moderation, one response of African pro-Empire loyalism was an infiltrationist kind of mortgaged anticolonialism. In the early 1900s, the best of the “civilized men”—schoolmasters, lawyers, clergymen, journalists, traders, and progressive peasants—puckered up to the best of the sympathetic liberal imperial establishment. Its drawing rooms included the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, Lord Buxton, the Union governor-general, and the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society, or at least until its secretary, John Harris, fell in with Union Prime Minister Louis Botha’s segregationist land policies.⁴ This was a calculating or strategic kind of deferential loyalism, ever-watchful for the right vocabulary to exert moral claims. It was exemplified by Sol Plaatje’s beguiling plea to Lloyd George in 1919, in which he tugged at the latter’s Welshness by invoking the plight of “the land of his fathers.”⁵

The purpose of such activity was, of course, to try to recall imperial men of enlightened vision to their paternalist duties, in the hope that their ethical

³ Christopher Saunders, “African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire before and after the South African War,” in Donal Lowry, ed., *The South African War Reappraised* (Manchester, 2000), 140–49.

⁴ Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (Johannesburg, 1984), 174–204.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 243–44.

muscle might yet stay the hand of an increasingly rapacious settler rule. Neil Parsons has provided one striking illustration of this in the case of the Tswana chiefs who traveled to Britain in the 1890s, insisting on the maintenance of direct British “protection” in Bechuanaland, a security that would be dashed by British South Africa Company rule.⁶ Another prominent example would be the 1913 Natives’ Land Act in South Africa, in response to which the African political elite mounted a mission to London in 1914 to press doggedly for liberal British intervention to turn things around by using reserve imperial powers to block racially discriminatory Union legislation.⁷ For at least a decade after Union and its creation of the first “New” South Africa (and arguably, for even longer),⁸ Britain was still morally a landlord, if of a neglectfully absentee kind, part of an almost ritualistic counter-theater of rights and civilized progress.⁹ Certainly, there can be little doubt about the weight of this pro-British consensus among the black elite. In scholarly literature, too, it is embedded as the most characteristic expression of black South African Empire sentiment, the specific consolatory tradition of an infant social elite, lubricated by dictionary English and mission Christianity, with a sure grasp of the gulf between “civilized” and “barbaric” or “respectable” and “raw,” and a continuing need to draw on the fag-end of a liberal imperialism.

A place to look for another level of alliance or affinity with a British interest is the domain of wars of Empire, and its mobilization of the minds and bodies of thousands of black Cape subjects. Here we might be able to glimpse something of deeply felt instincts and convictions that were more immediate, perhaps less driven by sentiment or public artifice, and rooted in wider cultural solidarities and an umbrella consciousness. As the costly South African War got underway, large numbers of ordinary, “freeborn” African and Coloured inhabitants who became caught up in the war effort drew on a fairly robust sense of citizenship of a Cape that was unambiguously British country, Crown territory to be defended against the menacing incursions of an alien Boer Republican “native law” or a rigid “Boer creed” of no legal equality.¹⁰

⁶ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe, and the Great White Queen* (Chicago, 1998).

⁷ Willan, *Plaatje*, 159–201.

⁸ See Saunders, “African Attitudes,” 146–47.

⁹ Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003), 80–81

¹⁰ Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899–1902* (Cambridge, 1991 & 2002), 93–119.

Such impulses of local duty towards the need of Empire in crisis applied, first, to those with a traditional anchorage in Cape Victorian virtues of “respectability” and “self-help,” organized urban smallholders and peasant “big men” who busied themselves with voluntary welfare and other activities to bolster the British cause, or otherwise threw themselves into patriotic agitation.¹¹ By 1900, African Vigilance Committees and Coloured War Councils in towns like Port Elizabeth, East London, Graaff-Reinet, and Worcester were advancing subscription funds and food donations exclusively to the British Army; ungraciously, if not rudely, the chocolate and biscuits run was not extended to colonial settler militia garrisons. As a Coloured printer from Wellington reminded his beavering associates in surrounding small rural towns, “our proud sacrifice of goods and labour is for those who have come here as our English brothers, not for these rough European guardsmen of uncertain character, some we are told are even Lebanese.”¹² Writing a private letter after his public collection of comfort goods for an arriving British infantry column in Kimberley in 1901, Arthur Hendrickse declared

I will never stand by with an empty pocket when I see such men, who set an example with their lives. Our country is as theirs, its English soil be numbered among the things of value we hold most dear.... What is it with all its riches, if it not be freed from every vestige of the despoiling Boers. These men who are here will fight on so that I who have children growing up will know they stand under their English Government.¹³

Examples of such heartfelt avowals of Cape British patriotism could be multiplied for these colonial war years; their writers, like the Coloured clerk, Hendrickse, were not necessarily producing something rousing for public consumption. Nor were they crafting through a romantic mist of myth and meaning about Cape colonial experience of the crisis of 1899–1902. They, were, for the most part, reflecting the immediacy of instinct and belief. And the overall message they sent out was one that assumed a primary moral unity with a national *British* effort, beyond the horizon of the dynamics of local settler state mobilization. In that respect, the South African War crisis could be said to have reactivated, if not regenerated, the underlying values and influential pull of a British

¹¹ Nasson, “Black Communities in Natal and the Cape,” in David Omissi and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The Impact of the South African War* (London, 2002), 47.

¹² Cape Archives (CA), Tulbagh magistracy, I/TBH 5/2/4/3/3, W. Samson, 4 Apr. 1900, encl. in Acting Resident Magistrate to Commandant, 26 Apr. 1900.

¹³ Hendrickse family papers (privately held), A. Hendrickse to his sister, 22 Oct. 1901. I am indebted to Mr B. Kleintjies for providing access and for permission to quote from letters.

Cape imperial creed, the potency of a nineteenth-century British cultural imperialism charted by Robert Ross,¹⁴ or what Vivian Bickford-Smith has depicted as the undertow of a “British hegemonic ideology within ‘Cape liberal’ rhetoric that lingered into the early twentieth century among black Cape colonists.”¹⁵

National mobilization by the Union of South Africa in 1914 again provided an enlarged imaginative space for external identification and integration with a British crusade. The moral virtue of black loyalist self-mobilization was heightened in 1914–15 by the menacing existence of the “enemy within,” Cape Afrikaner republicans fingered for the insurrectionary 1914 Afrikaner Rebellion, and other groups singled out as “enemy aliens,” such as immigrant rural Jewish traders with Germanic names or Lebanese merchants stigmatized as scheming “Turks.” As wartime tensions mounted, so the Cape’s little nation of Coloured and African “respectables” added their voice to calls for suspect local inhabitants to be policed, or even rounded up and secured in camps for the duration of hostilities.¹⁶ Their increasingly open articulation of distrust or open hostility towards marginal, non-English whites characterized as “seditious Boers” or as “low,” “unfit,” or “dubious,”¹⁷ not only affirmed their claim upon inclusion into a common home front social and political order. Through sharing in the creation of domestic scapegoats, black patriots also hardened their self-definition of identity as a colonial “English” community, expressed through a micro-culture of urban and rural solidarities and forceful languages of external loyalty and Empire commitment.

Unfurling at the outbreak of war and running deep into 1915, a ribbon of pro-war cables, petitions, addresses, press declamations and other forms of tribute or association with war mobilization expressed an unequivocal message: the basis of war patriotism was a vision of empire rather than of “nation.” In a pecking order of political instrumentalization, it was Empire loyalism first, wartime duty to the Union second. The voices of petitions, memoranda, pamphlets, and newspaper statements conveyed a distinctive hierarchy of patriotism: first to the

¹⁴ Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750– 1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge, 1999).

¹⁵ Bickford-Smith, “Revisiting Anglicisation,” 85.

¹⁶ *Weekly Telegraph*, 15 Oct. 1914; *South African News*, 27 Nov. 1914; Nasson, “Springboks ou autruches: Les réactions sud-africaines au déclenchement de la guerre de 1914,” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 179 (1995), 78–79.

¹⁷ *De Zwartlander*, 11 Nov. 1914; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 25 Jan. 1915; *Worcester Advertiser*, 29 Jan. 1915.

Crown, then to the British government, and only then to Louis Botha and the Union state. Abdullah Abdurahman, leader of the African Peoples' Organisation (APO), the leading Cape Coloured political movement, was an early and apt standard-bearer of this position.¹⁸ Behaving (and, given his Savile Row grooming, looking) for all the world like the personal emissary of Sir Edward Grey, Abdurahman urged his audiences to put aside their domestic discontents in order to rally to the British cause, for "if the British Empire fell they would all go with it."¹⁹ The Botha government did little to endear itself to APO leadership by its initial color bar reluctance to countenance the formation of a Coloured infantry force. And, when in 1915 the Union administration buckled and authorized the raising of a Cape Corps, it gained little credit. For the APO, successful mobilization of a Cape Corps was linked squarely to the hope of "receiving Imperial recognition as a people."²⁰ This sense of the high value of what was termed "true" or "full" recognition was also caught nicely by a Tswana correspondent to the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* early in 1915. "Surely one does not have to be a militarist to pledge allegiance to the Empire," he declared. "One has only to realise that this European War will be for the natives the great chance to acquire at last a just and recognized status as loyal subjects of the Crown."²¹

This takes us to the local response to British war propaganda. The fanciful notion that London was fighting for the democratic rights and liberties of oppressed nationalities in the name of progress and civilization certainly achieved some local impact. Prominent APO figures like Abdurahman and John Tobin saw connections between this evangelizing war aim and the logical end of imperial policy towards South Africa—surely, the removal of chafing racial disabilities, a wider franchise, and a more inclusive national political community. Some of their more bookish associates and followers saw things in these terms, too. If, for Lloyd George, "the Serbs were like the Welsh,"²² Sidney Hendrickse of the northern

¹⁸ APO, 15 Sept. 1914; also Nason, "War Opinion in South Africa in 1914," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23, 1 (1995), 266.

¹⁹ Cited in Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African "Coloured" Politics* (Cape Town, 1987), 85.

²⁰ APO, 7 Aug. 1915; see also A.M. Grundlingh, "Die Suidafrikaanse Gekleurdes endie Eerste Wereldoorlog" (D. Litt. diss., University of South Africa, 1981), 149–59.

²¹ *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 25 Jan. 1915.

²² Cited in Keith Robbins, *The First World War* (Oxford, 1994), 108.

Cape was likewise inclined to envisage the downtrodden South Slavs as the Cape Coloured people, itching for their yoke to be lifted.²³

African and Coloured elites who called upon men to be patriotic and to undertake military duties in the Great War in the belief that it offered an opportunity to prove their mettle as Crown subjects and to strengthen the legitimacy of their claim upon greater rights, may in a way have been compensating for their own marginality and frustration through rhetorical excess. Equally, belief in the progressive capacity and influence of Empire did not blind observers to obvious inequalities and injustices in Union service conditions. Questions were raised about the well-being of the 25,000 or so Cape Corps infantrymen deployed in East Africa and France, claiming that they were being subjected to undue stress and were suffering fatigue because of their load, and that they were being incompetently officered by whites, "some of these even being, to all intents, no more than Dutch South Africans."²⁴ As for the South African Native Labour Contingent, to which members of the educated Cape African elite, including those of the South African Native National Congress, lent their early support as a "great experiment,"²⁵ it did not take long for grumbling to break out. Eastern Cape correspondents aired discontents over various petty segregatory measures, the imposition of labor discipline by Union Defence Force officers who had been contaminated by the habits of their Native Affairs service background, the brooding and meddling organizational presence of Native Affairs Department officials, and the pinching humiliation of accommodating Labour Corps Battalions in France in tightly controlled closed compounds.²⁶

Of equal significance was the apportioning of blame for onerous and discriminatory terms of service and, in the case of the South African Native Labour Contingent, the tepid response to the 1916–17 recruiting campaign for noncombatant laboring servicemen. As Brian Willan first noted over two decades ago, the fortunes of the mobilization effort were affected adversely "by the fact of its direct association with the South African authorities," even though "technically they were acting on behalf of the Imperial government." Popular feeling towards the scheme "was inevitably coloured by the deeply felt distrust that was attached

²³ Hendrickse papers, S. Hendrickse to his sister, 28 Sept. 1914.

²⁴ Hendrickse papers, T. Hibner to S. Hendrickse, 16 Oct. 1915.

²⁵ Norman Clothier, *Black Valour: The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916–1918 and the Sinking of the "Mendi"* (Pietermaritzburg, 1987), 17.

²⁶ *Umtata Herald*, 14 July 1917; *Kokstad Advertiser*, 28 July 1917; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 22 Aug. 1917.

to individuals and institutions associated with the South African government.”²⁷ Characteristically, Mxonywa Mongameli, a former student of Lovedale mission, described compound conditions and controls upon movement at a base depot in Dieppe a “slur” upon his “character as a loyal soldier of the King,” and proposed writing to the monarch to request that “the natives of our corps” be “removed from “these pigsties” and “given the self-respect which is due to all who are true British subjects.”²⁸ Responsibility for these crises of morale stuck squarely to the boots of Louis Botha, not those of the General Headquarters of Sir Douglas Haig.

Indeed, among teachers, clerks, interpreters, and other educated African patriots, preconceptions of greatly improved conditions under direct Imperial command appear to have been well-nigh universal.²⁹ Certainly, among some of those flagging on the Cape Corps in the Great War, there was indignation that other black imperial subjects identified as “British” and “wholly civilised” were being enlisted in the British Army itself as regular contingents, technically under the same conventions as front-line troops from the settler dominions. Given that this was the status accorded West Indian battalions, one individual felt that the Cape Corps should be absorbed equally as “civilised regulars,” and not handled by “Botha’s men” as if they were “common Egyptians” or “barbaric Chinese” bearers and carriers.³⁰

Beneath this, there is a second substratum of belief and sentiment to be plumbed. This entails some consideration of the attitudes and motives of those ordinary Cape volunteers who took up arms on the British side or engaged their labor as civilian auxiliaries in the 1899–1902 conflict or as laboring servicemen in the 1914–1918 war. These African and Coloured recruits came from varied ranks of life, including farm workers, urban laborers, artisans, small traders, printers, teachers, migrant workers, rural tenants, and resident peasants on Ciskeian and Transkeian lands. Theirs was a world of war duty, undertaken on the one hand by individuals who were the sons of elder headmen in Pondoland and, on the other, by “slightly Coloured” clerks and masons from the Western Cape.

²⁷ Willan, “The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916–1918,” *Journal of African History*, 19, 1 (1978), 69; also Clothier, *Black Valour*, 19.

²⁸ *Foreign Mission Chronicle* 18, 2 (1917), 36.

²⁹ For the intricate workings of institutional racism within British forces, see Bernard Waites, “Black Men in White Men’s Wars,” in John Bourne, Peter Liddle, and Ian Whitehead, eds., *The Great World War 1914–45*, II (London, 2001), 258, 261–67.

³⁰ Hendrickse papers, T. Hibner to S. Hendrickse, 12 Oct. 1916.

Their world was not so much bullish as sharply ideological. By and large, the “Cape Boys” of 1900 and the “civilised boys” of East London in 1916 appear to have believed in what they were fighting for, to have had some awareness of issues at stake, and to have held passionate concerns about them. Of course, exactly how widespread this was has still to remain a matter for speculation. What real ideological motivations could be discerned from Kuruman peasants or East London transport workers in their Labour Corps khaki, mustered in a row to cheer on the appearance of a visiting general or other dignitary, or cajoled into putting on a “warrior” dance display for appreciative military chaplains? Yet, as a general impression, expressions of belief in fighting for a “British” imperial cause were more than fleeting. In fact, they could also be heartfelt and remarkably robust.

Of course, emphasis on the existence of ideological motivation and commitment rubs against the grain of a broader contemporary historiography of warfare which concludes that belligerents either have little or no idea of what they are fighting for, or that ideological awareness is of the faintest motivational consequence in their voluntarist impulses. In a general comment on this observation, James McPherson, the eminent scholar of the American Civil War, has suggested that seeing solidarity and bonding as the primary motivational factor among combatants has established a “paradigm” that “relegates patriotism and ideology to a negligible, almost nonexistent place.”³¹ Men who enlisted to fight against a common danger, whether in the Civil War, the Great War, or the Second World War, are generally thought to have fallen into line not so much through ideological belief as through the power of adventurous instincts, peer group cohesion and pressure, the reflexes of masculine identity, and the compulsions of male bonding, expectations of private and personal reward, the bite of unemployment, and the urge to flee burdensome domestic complications. In particular African colonial contexts, when considering those who were not war conscripts, to these one might add such factors as the pull of higher than average pay, inflated anticipation of spoils, patron-client inducements, and the prospect of getting out and dusting off an old “warrior tribe” pedigree, for ethnic renewal under the plumage of a recovered martial manhood.³²

³¹ James McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861–1865* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1994), 3.

³² See for example, Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth, N.H., and Oxford, 1999), 71; Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Senegalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth, N.H., and Oxford, 1991), 89; Risto Marjomaa, “The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895–1939,” *Journal of African History* 44, 3(2003), 420.

Yet modern wars called forth other sentiments from many Cape black volunteers. "As a respectable British Subject," wrote a northern Cape mission station farrier on joining the Cape Corps in 1915, "it is my responsibility to help in the present war, which is forced upon all free men by the Kaiser. We have a duty to the country of our Majesty the King. I for one am willing to come forward on my life."³³ This man's sister had married a discharged Northumberland Fusiliers corporal who had stayed on to settle after the end of the South African War. The emergence of marital and familial bonds between some Coloured women and their households and time-expired British soldiers who became immigrants after 1902 may well repay some investigation as a social transmission belt of Anglicization within "respectable" urban Coloured communities in places like Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Kimberley.

At another level entirely, so might the reinforcing cultural connection of the experience of British generalship and the ritual signs and florid symbols of its field command between the South African War and the Great War. Veteran Boer War hands like John French, Henry Rawlinson, Hubert Gough, and even Douglas Haig made a point of looking up South African Native Labour Contingent camps in France, to provide a paternalistic pat of recognition. In effect, high command extended to the Contingent its customary role in sustaining troop morale through cheerful addresses that combined a cultivation of "spirit" with assurances of the justness of the British imperial cause, along with the provision of small comforts like extra rations. The king added his personal piece. Following George V's inspection of the contingent and his comforting address in July 1917, M.L. Posholi murmured his satisfaction at having heard "that we blacks too are British subjects, children of the father of the great Nation, trusted ones and helpers, and that we are cared for and loved."³⁴

Their response to these encounters with Britain's finest equestrian personalities was appreciably more full-throated than anything accorded their own commanding officer, Colonel S.M. Pritchard, to say nothing of Jan Smuts himself, according to some peeved South African journalists in 1917. Correspondents were put out that while it was pleasing "to see even the less intelligent among the Natives" greeting Botha's Cabinet crony with "politeness and proper respect," the appearance of touring British generals elicited an "enthusiasm" or "exultation" of foot-thumping that "no visitor from the Union, however high his station, seems to

³³ CA, Klipdam magistracy, I/KDM 4/1/3/2/2, Manuel to Resident Magistrate, 29 Aug. 1915.

³⁴ Quoted in Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War* (Johannesburg, 1987), 125–26.

manage to excite.”³⁵ British officers who attended a Cape Corps victory parade a few months after the Battle of Square Hill in Palestine in September 1918 had another whiff of this face-to-face favor. After fussing over preferential seating arrangements for two warrant officers and a padre from General Headquarters in the Middle East, parading Cape Corps sergeants donated a captured Turkish gun to them, “to be taken away to London” as triumphal confirmation that “the un-Christian enemy is being driven away from our common soil.”³⁶ One of the NCOs pledged his “readiness to continue the fight there for the King and Empire” and continued, somewhat more sensationally, to carry on fighting until his “bones shall bleach the desert sand of that far place.”³⁷

Just over a decade earlier, avowals of this kind had assumed an especially pungent and visceral form. Then, large numbers of men, sometimes egged-on and aided by women,³⁸ had turned out in some force in small towns and villages as militia guardsmen and “watchers” to defend a British Cape Colony against sweeping incursions by Boer republican commandos. One part of their fighting instinct seems to have been quite simply one of the most powerful of all combat motivations, the classic defense of home and hearth against an invading enemy. In calling for the raising of a Coloured Town Guard in a midlands settlement during 1901, smallholders drew on their rights under the 1853 Cape constitution and its protective nexus of citizenship and arms, declaring that the war was not simply a white man’s affair, “it is also our trouble. The Boers are at our doors, and we are entitled to defend our families.”³⁹ What the masculine arena of petitions and assemblies reflected was the degree to which the precious moral sanctity of “homes” and “respectable families” had turned households into a regime of militant exhortation. The urgency about arming was the fragility of a front which suddenly lay right outside the vegetable patch or backyard clothes line. Beyond, from a smoldering hinterland, “brutal renegades” were pressing in.⁴⁰

³⁵ *East London Daily Dispatch*, 30 Oct. 1917.

³⁶ Hendrickse papers, D. Galant to S. Hendrickse, 8 Nov. 1918.

³⁷ Hendrickse papers, statement of A. Thomas, encl. in S. Hendrickse to T. Hibner, 9 Nov. 1918.

³⁸ Nasson, “Africans at War,” in John Gooch, ed., *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London, 2000), 134–37.

³⁹ CA, Dordrecht magistracy, I/DD 1/66, 52/1901, Petition from Coloured Men To Assist in the Defence of Richmond, 3 Apr. 1901; see also Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s War*, esp. 43–45.

⁴⁰ *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 27 Apr. 1901.

Another part of the will to fight was the tenacity of a localized Cape patriotism. Particularly for small propertied men, assimilated and socialized into the familiar rhetoric and routine practices of a Cape liberal tradition, there was a shrill intonation of a Cape "tradition" to be sustained against the menace of northern Boer republican transgression and subversion. The defensive needs of a territorial tribalism demanded the securing of known colonial stability and authority. As much as any other Cape loyalists, the right to uphold the Queen's Peace had fallen to their hands.

Beyond this, there was also a further layer of expression to patriotic service, a condition of mind to be detected not merely among the better-educated and the propertied, but also within the middling ranks of literate artisans and more skilled workers. This was the overarching medium of mustering for a fight to preserve Empire in the Cape, what one rifleman called "our civilisation of English laws,"⁴¹ through a cumbersome usage of imported British imperial ideology in the service of a local identity and its needs.

It was the crisis of war after 1899 that gave it so keen an edge; the threat of being hemmed in by a rampaging, anti-imperial Boer republicanism exposed a nerve that had to be capped by an armored liberalism. From various declarations of loyalty and other expressions of belligerent commitment, we can recover three notable views, all rooted in a righteous understanding of a Cape colonial citizenship. The first was that some volunteers professed to be fighting to uphold "Equal Rights for all civilised British subjects, such as those of Christian manners."⁴² The right, if not the necessity, of "civilised" African and Coloured men to take up arms in an internecine European colonial war was derived precisely from that Cape status of British citizenship; that, in any event, is what was most noisily asserted.

A second belief, perhaps more unusual and striking, could be glimpsed mainly among better-educated urban Coloured inhabitants and well-schooled Africans with starched collars. This was an understanding of British historical precedent for their present dangerous circumstances. Thus, for a Cape Town court clerk, the constitutional liberties of the Cape Colony were an overseas implant of the inheritance of Saxon liberties; what were the "evil customs" of the racial oppression of the Orange Free State and South African Republic, but "as fearsome as the Normans ... it is the duty of every aborigine under the English flag

⁴¹ *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 16 Mar. 1901.

⁴² CA, Douglas magistracy, I/DGS 292/02, J. April, deposition, 7 Dec. 1900.

and blessed by English religion not to yield any of its rights and protection.”⁴³ A warlike literary crusader from a northeastern Cape mission settlement seemed to have become bewitched by William Shakespeare, announcing that unless he and others around him took a hand in guarding Cape territory, the colony would be at risk of sinking back “into some beast again,” and becoming “peopled by wolves.”⁴⁴ Given that the black schooled elite of the late-Victorian Cape was being taught the legendary antics of the 9th century King Alfred the Great and his burning of a subject’s cakes, the Roman invasion of Britain, and the Wars of the Roses, the notion of the British past as a moral charter for the Cape colonial present was possibly not quite as dotty as it may look—at least inasmuch as it skirted more radical matters, such as the romantic William Wordsworth’s class grievances against the grasping Earl of Lonsdale.

Emerging from this bundle of beliefs came a third ideological thrust, quite widely rooted and emanating even from individuals in humble laboring circumstances. This was a contagious consciousness among enlisted volunteers of being freeborn. In the Ciskei and Transkei, Mfengu and Bhaca militia levies and frontier guard detachments routinely declared themselves to be “freeborn English Natives”; in southwestern and northern stretches of the colony, garrisons and blockhouse watches invariably identified themselves as “free” or “freeborn Cape Boys,” or “freeborn English Coloured men.”⁴⁵ At one level, these popular assertions seem to evoke nothing so much as the works of E. P. Thompson. Here was the county of the Cape Colony, infused with the permissive tolerance of a liberal culture of rights and equality of all before the law by its colonial gentry. Even as that assimilationist tradition was in increasingly steep decline, here were the watchful plebs, taking to themselves some stiff portion of the constitutionalist rhetoric of their gentry rulers to confirm the legitimacy of their “free” rights.⁴⁶

The colonial freeborn of the war years of 1899–1902 understood that political currency well, and perceived something else besides. Some of them had a word for the fate that they saw awaiting them as patriotic Cape citizens if Britain did not prevail over the Boer Republics. If imperial power were rolled back and

⁴³ CA, Somerset East magistracy, I/SSE 10/19, H. Stoffels to Resident Magistrate, 8 Jan. 1901.

⁴⁴ Hendrickse papers, S. Hendrickse, personal notes, Mar. 1901. The source of this inspirational imagery looks to have been either Henry IV or Henry V.

⁴⁵ Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s War*, 157–68.

⁴⁶ Drawing on, for instance, E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, 1991), 1–15.

Boer annexation succeeded, it would bring on the introduction of “Free State Native Law,” expropriating customary rights, extinguishing valued claims, and diminishing their individual human dignity by regarding them as *schepsels* (“things”) or *zwaartgoeden* (“black things”).⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, in a society with a deeply embedded legacy of slavery, this infected Coloured communities with a dread of its restoration. Invasion nerves kept alive fears of possible enslavement or, in another very common formulation, tyranny or despotism.

In the mannered style of petitions or open letters to various district magistrates, this specter of a relapse comes across with a fierce clarity of feeling. “We know what it is to be citizens,” wrote a fistful of pushy town guards late in 1901, “if we do not act strong our liberties will be torn down by these Free State Dutchmen.”⁴⁸ And, again, early in 1902, “These renegade Boers coming in here are despots.... they will turn us into slaves.”⁴⁹ This near-neurotic sense of jeopardy was captured neatly by a Namaqualand Border Scouts rider who declared that “in this place, without the English flag and its peace, our free life is as nothing ... surely our children will be cast back to slavery.”⁵⁰

What is the significance of all this? For one thing, there is enough to suggest that the convictions of Cape war patriotism were shared across the grid of ethnicity and class. If predictably strongest among the educated, the propertied, and the enfranchised, swirling ideological sentiment also had some wider purchase upon the minds of lower classes of colonial subjects. Bristling Africans in eastern regions and jumpy Coloured men in western localities embodied a common message: that they would be fighting not only for the survival of their *own* homes and families, or the security of their material possessions, but for the conserving of what they perceived to be a just and legitimate order of “English” imperial citizenship.

It meant that it was always more than a willingness to sacrifice for an imaginative “mainland” ally of whom much was still expected. After all, for these warring Cape colonials, Britain was not yet divisible, even in 1918. Naturally enough, arguing for this perspective is not to imply that animated volunteers were entirely typical of Cape black participants in the South African War or, for that

⁴⁷ CA, I/TBH 5/1/4/4/4, Intelligence report, 14 Apr. 1901.

⁴⁸ CA, Cradock magistracy, I/CDK 8/23, 3/66/1900, Statement by A. Buys and others, 17 Feb. 1900.

⁴⁹ CA, I/CDK 8/25, Deposition by S. Booi, 3 Feb. 1902.

⁵⁰ CA, Upington magistracy, 5/1/4/3/3, encl. in Acting Resident Magistrate to Lt. M.P. Holt, 4 Mar. 1902.

matter, the Great War. What would imperial citizenship and a vocabulary of rights have meant to distrustful East London dockworkers and disgruntled Griqualand East peasants?

Yet for those who were not dragooned or cajoled, nor forced into war work by empty stomachs, neither were men with clear fighting convictions altogether uncommon. In wartime, a plain-speaking sense of some British imperial affinity bound together servicemen and fighting auxiliaries fairly cohesively when they were otherwise still so deeply divided by linguistic divisions, cultural identities, and the unequal scales of literacy. Writing from Alexandria, a few weeks before the end of the Great War, a Cape Corps corporal recalled with swelling pride his male family tradition of imperial war service, stretching well back into the nineteenth century. "Born on the soil of what we know is the King's country," he reflected, "it is known that we share in a great duty."⁵¹ He was, on this occasion, writing not in English but in Dutch-Afrikaans. The flexible web of Cape "English" patriotism did not only acquire popular depth and resonance during a war crisis. It grew to be increasingly porous in some quarters, and by the First World War was certainly far from being exclusively dependent upon an English-speaking identity. Had it been, it would assuredly have been a much narrower and less penetrating phenomenon.

One of many forces bequeathed by the 1899–1902 War was the hardening, if not the creation, within rural Coloured Dutch-Afrikaans communities of *jingoes* ("jingos") and *rooi-rooies* ("red-reds") and *Tommies* ("Tommy Atkins") who turned their backsides upon Dutch Reformed Mission Churches and flocked to Anglican and Presbyterian station communities. For this creative, semi-bilingual band, the lure may well have been more that of running the flag up a new religious and language line than the thrill of reciting from the Book of Common Prayer. For in the assertion of being part of an "English" domain, these men were in a sense transcending their situation. Turned into veterans of colonial warfare by the South African War, they went on to re-enlist in the Cape Corps during the Great War, not only as civilians but as an informal reserve of soldiers.

That interplay prompts one or two observations by way of conclusion. Probably the most obvious is that a pugnacious Cape "Englandism" was assuredly not created by these war episodes: warfare stoked embers that were already warm. By and large, historians have scarcely begun to take proper measure of what warmed them.⁵² In addition to what is already known, the understanding of black

⁵¹ Hendrickse papers, G. February to S. Hendrickse, 7 Oct. 1918.

⁵² In which connection, see Bickford-Smith, "Revisiting Anglicization," 82–87.

“Anglicization” might concern itself with the implanting of late-Victorian uniformed youth movements like the Anglican Church Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade into Coloured and African communities, the Sunday School movement, the cultivated expatriate character of Anglican mission church clergy, the assimilation of British sports and working-class pastimes by local working class communities—darts, pigeons, crafts and hobbies, and other kinds of cultural transfer that hit the assimilationist spot. Here, the crust deposited by the South African War undoubtedly encouraged the spread of an associational culture, absorbed through a fretwork of mediation and negotiation in its adaptation to Cape realities.

Finally, we should never overlook the fact that the imperial order gave a body of Cape citizens rights and immunities not bequeathed to their counterparts in other regions of South Africa; many of those who took part in these two large wars considered themselves the inheritors of an earlier nineteenth-century emancipation, one engineered by an anti-slavery Britain. Solomon Ramanana, an educated small hauler from Somerset East and marked locally as a “native of astute mind,” was sufficiently steeped in Cape “tradition” to know all too well that settler voices of racial mastery did not all sound alike. Bringing his own gun with him to the Somerset East town guard, he was more than up for a fight so that he “would not be living under being bossed about.” Ramanana knew the distinction between the respectful deference of calling local English-speaking farmers *seer* (“sir”), and the scraping servility of his finding himself having to address newly installed Boer invaders as *baas* (“boss”).⁵³ He was a subject, but also a citizen. One view of historical hindsight suggests that we smile at the credulousness of *kholwa* Africans, the 50 or 75 pounds a year men like Ramanana.⁵⁴ Another, however, is to say that in fact they deserve to be taken seriously. In the strength of their defensive will to fight and later willingness to serve beyond their frontiers, they exhibited high levels of Cape “imperial English” patriotism and xenophobic prejudices. Alongside this, in defense of their own sense of identity, they displayed purposeful solidarities as well, gearing themselves effectively to take a stand behind a bastion of colonial intellect.

⁵³ *Thistle*, 12, 4 (1901), 88–89.

⁵⁴ Mission-schooled African men whose literacy and annual income levels qualified them for the 19th century Cape nonracial franchise.