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Postcolonialism and the Boer War¹

Richard Corballis*

In their seminal study of postcolonial literature (*The Empire Writes Back*), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin begin by sketching two preliminary stages that fail to effect the 'subversion' to which postcolonialism inevitably aspires. The first of these stages they label 'the imperial period', during which the writing of a (white) 'literate elite' privileges 'the "home" over the "native", the "metropolitan" over the "provincial" or "colonial"'. The literature of the second stage edges closer to 'anti-imperial... subversion', but its 'natives' and 'outcasts' write 'under imperial licence', if only because they used 'the language of the dominant culture' (4-6).

It is this second stage that interests me here. While the older colonies (including America and – arguably – Ireland) may be said to have entered this stage as early as the late eighteenth century, few, if any, of the younger ones (colonised during the nineteenth century) reached it prior to 1900. It was inevitably the settler colonies that made the first moves. In South Africa (as it would soon be known) the Afrikaners, victims (as they saw themselves) of British colonialism, went to war in 1899 to establish (or rather re-establish)² their control of the Transvaal and its neighbour, the Orange Free State. In the early stages of the conflict there were glimpses of 'imperial licence', such as the proposition of the Commandant of Johannesburg Commando that the rival armies at Mafeking should join in 'cricket on Sundays and... concerts and balls on Sunday evenings' (Pakenham 196), but this gentlemanly camaraderie soon gave way to something more like absolute war. In the end, of course, the Boers lost the war, but they won the peace; their surrender in 1902 turned out to be little more than a breathing-space, their huge casualties notwithstanding, and as

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² Having colonised the Transvaal in 1877, Britain effectively handed it back to the Afrikaners in 1881 (after the First Boer War, regarded by the Afrikaners as a war of independence), and then – once gold had been found in Kimberley – set out to repossess it.

early as 1906 the Transvaal and the Orange Free State became self-governing colonies within the British Empire.

One of the factors that prompted the Boers' surrender in 1902 was the threat of a native uprising. Pakenham records that:

Throughout the war, the meekness of the African majority had been one of the most striking features. None of the peoples who had been worsted in recent native wars – Basutos, Zulus, or Magatos – had seized their opportunity to pay off old scores and recover lost territory... This was all the more surprising, given the way they had been treated by the Boers, who had cheerfully looted their cattle, flogged and murdered those who helped the British, and even massacred the whole civilian population of a Transvaal village, Modderfontein... However, it was now apparent [in 1902] that the natives were stirring... (566-7)

As writers too the natives were beginning to stir. The first novel by a black South African was published in 1930, though it was written ten years earlier. This was Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, which traces the fortunes of his own Tswana people during the nineteenth century up to the first encounters with the colonisers. A major section of the book focuses on the Tswana's clashes with the Zulus, led by the redoubtable Chaka, whose story was told by Thomas Mofolo first in his Sesotho language (1925) and then in an English translation (1931). Such re-enactments (and reconstructions) of a people's history are, of course, regular features of the postcolonial experience – so crucial that they typically emerge as early as *The Empire's* 'second stage'. That Plaatje and Mofolo's histories were thus written 'under imperial licence' is evident in their readiness to mythologise their subjects along British (largely Shakespearean) lines.³

But *Mhudi* was not Plaatje's first significant English text. As editor of the bilingual newspaper *Koranta ea Becoana/The Bechuana Gazette* from 1902, his stance became increasingly 'anti-imperial', and his outspoken responses to the notorious 'Natives' Land Act (1913)', subsequently published in *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), were patently subversive, even though – by virtue of such features as his imperial prose⁴ and his choice of a London publisher – he was forever writing 'under imperial licence'. One sentence, in particular, has haunted South Africa ever since:

³ Schooled by missionaries (German and English) and groomed by the South African Improvement Society (established in Kimberley in 1895), Plaatje was, according to a contemporary (Vere Stent, a Reuters correspondent), 'quick witted and understanding and quick to pick up and catch a new expression, ask the meaning and the derivation of it and add it to his vocabulary' (Plaatje *Mafeking* 5). His 'imperial licence' is confirmed by the fact that he went on to publish a translation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*.

⁴ Plaatje's obituary in *The Times* (28 July 1932) described him as an 'eloquent advocate of Native Rights'.

Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth. (*Native Life* 17)

He continued to argue the case for rights of indigenous peoples – American as well as African – until his untimely death in 1932.

Plaatje's literary output can be traced back a little further still. His *Mafeking Diary* was written in 1899-1900 (though not published until 1973). Again the carefully wrought prose indicates his fascination with the English language, but this time the content displays precious little evidence of 'anti-imperial' subversion; throughout there is a sense of complacency based on his pride at achieving a middling place in the imperial hierarchy. There are, however, moments in the *Diary* – especially during the threat of starvation in the dark days of January-February 2000 – when subversion threatens to break through the imperial façade. On 24 January, for example, he ruminated thus:

There is a proclamation by the Colonel R.S.S. Baden-Powell that no food stores of any kind would in the future be sold to the public; and white people are now going to buy food in rations and be compelled to buy small quantities, the same as blacks. I have often heard the black folk say money is useless as you cannot eat it when you feel hungry, and now I have lived it and experienced it... (89).

It is tempting to argue that, for South Africa and quite possibly for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, Plaatje's observations – incipient in the *Mafeking Diary* (and suppressed until 1973) but increasingly explicit in the *Koranta ea Becoana* – constituted the pivot that facilitated the shift from the first to the second stage of *The Empire's* paradigm. Acceptance of this proposition may then help us to recognise the extent to which the Boer War opened others' eyes to the possibility of 'anti-imperial... subversion'. Starting at home in South Africa, we find that, in what was officially deemed a 'white man's war', the indigenous peoples were dragooned into action by both sides without due reward, despite Joseph Chamberlain's promise 'to give coloured British subjects "most favoured nation status"' (Pakenham 120). Not surprisingly, the Zulus eventually reacted to the ignominy of Boer persecution and British indifference by staging a bloody uprising against the Boers on 6 May 1902. Meanwhile the Transvaal Uitlanders (Germans, French and Americans as well as the predominant British – all of them denied suffrage) no less than the Afrikaner majority in the British Cape Colony had been forced to examine their loyalties. And the war had attracted the attention and involvement of numerous colonies and communities from far beyond the Transvaal and Cape Colony. British regiments were deployed from India, Burma, Ceylon, Egypt, Malta and Crete, and camp-followers of various backgrounds (including Mahatma Gandhi) witnessed the fighting at close quarters. Irish troops fought on both sides, Major John MacBride's support of the Boers anticipating the 'terrible

beauty' of the 1916 Easter uprising in Dublin. The European colonisers (notably Germany) looked on so threateningly that the British took to searching their ships (to no avail). And, more important for my purposes, Australia, Canada and New Zealand sent troops to fight for Britain – a move that prompted significant misgivings among their own indigenous and settler communities.

All three of these settler colonies responded swiftly to Britain's call for support in South Africa. In the case of Australia, however, there was a significant minority vote against involvement in the War: *The Bulletin*, then as now an influential and outspoken weekly journal, vigorously opposed it. *The Bulletin's* stance was staunchly 'republican'; it purported to represent the views of 'the Bush', which meant that it 'despised the monarchy and the English ruling classes' (Serle 60) – an attitude natural enough, given the high percentage of republican Irish (not to mention ex-convicts) among the Australian population. One way of registering distaste for 'the monarchy and the English ruling classes' was to oppose the Boer War, to which the five Australian colonies (and the Commonwealth after 1 January 1901) dutifully despatched military contingents. *The Bulletin* insisted that 'as a whole, the sentiment of the Bush is strongly against the war, and against the shameful part unconcerned Australia has taken in it' (6 January 1900, 6). 'This country,' it maintained, 'shouldn't join in wars which it has no voice in making or unmaking' (28 July 1900, 6). The Boers were, it insisted, only attempting to defend 'their Australia' (6 January 1900, 6); Britain was intent on destroying 'the liberties of two little Dutch Republics in Africa' (28 April 1900, 6),⁵ much as it continued to suppress the liberty of the Irish.

The Bulletin was not alone in its opinions. Long after the War, the contentious issues surrounding the execution of Australian Harry Harbord Morant (a sometime author of poems printed in *The Bulletin*, as it happened) were aired in Kit Denton's popular novel (*The Breaker*, 1973), followed by Kenneth Ross's equally popular play (*Breaker Morant*, 1978) and Bruce Beresford's still more popular film (*Breaker Morant*, 1980). But as early as 1902, misgivings were evident in a novel entitled *Zealandia's Guerdon*, one of the later works of the prolific Australian author William Walker. Like Walker himself, the novel's protagonist (Arthur Somerset) is a New South Welshman, but the plot requires him to spend most of his time in New Zealand – hence the title. Twice disappointed in love, he returns briefly to Sydney, enlists in an Australian contingent and heads for the Boer War. This episode (covered in chapter 20) focuses not only on the heroic feats of the Australian troops but also on their dissatisfaction with the British handling

⁵ In its readiness to side with the colonised Boers, *The Bulletin* gave no thought to the indigenous whom the Boers themselves had colonised. This oversight was not really surprising, given that until 1961 the journal's masthead featured the slogan 'Australia for the White Man'.

of the war, and – as a corollary – on their developing sense of nationhood. Somerset (like ‘Breaker Morant’) deploras the British “‘Bai Jove” sort of [officers]’ (222), while another Australian scoffs at the reluctance of the British Prime Minister (W.E. Gladstone) to deploy colonial troops (229). Much earlier the novel’s narrator has expressed the hope that ‘the Boer war should make the old land value her loyal, warm-hearted colonies more’ (89).

Back from the War, Walker’s Arthur is able to revive his initial love interest, and he takes his New Zealand inamorata back to Sydney and marries her. Walker does not press the point, but it is worth noting here that the Sydney to which he returns is no longer the capital of the British colony of New South Wales. ‘The Commonwealth of *Australia* Constitution Bill’ was introduced in the British House of Commons on 24 March 1900 and passed on 7 July of the same year. Federation took effect on 1 January 1901, with Melbourne as Australia’s interim capital. *The Bulletin* played a significant role in this development too, this time on the winning side: its attacks on ‘the monarchy and the English ruling classes’ – and on the continent’s recalcitrant colonies (especially Western Australia and New Zealand, which toyed with the idea of joining the Federation until the very last minute) – were instrumental in strengthening the cause of Federation.⁶

The heady combination of Federation and the growing scepticism towards Britain’s handling of the War clearly thrust Australia into the second stage of *The Empire*’s paradigm. Meanwhile New Zealand was reacting rather differently to these issues; it opted out of Federation and showed little interest in questioning the imperialist nature of the War, preferring to regard its new-found symbol, Zealandia, as a daughter (or even a sister) of Britain’s Britannia.⁷ There was – in parts of Australia and Canada too, of course – a good deal of tub-thumping in public places as the colonial troops went off to – and returned from – the war. For example, a performance of the pantomime ‘Ali Baba’ in Wellington on 12 October 1899 was interrupted by an announcement from the stage that ‘war had been declared between Briton and Boer’, and the pantomime was swiftly converted into a patriotic concert, featuring such songs as ‘God Save the Queen’, ‘Rule Britannia’, ‘Sons of the Sea’, and ‘Sons of the Empire’, along with ‘a series of tableaux illustrating triumphs of the Anglo-Saxon race’ culminating in ‘a good tableau representing Britannia and Her Colonies’ (*Evening Post*, 13 October 1899, 5). Then, ‘in Timaru on Pretoria Day, 7 June 1900, local women and girls appeared in floats and carriages dressed

⁶ Just one significant plank in *The Bulletin*’s agenda was thrown out by Westminster: the British Privy Council, rather than an Australian Supreme Court, was retained as the highest court of the land. *The Bulletin* was, of course, furious at the retention of this vestige of imperialism. This link to Britain was removed only in 1975.

⁷ For a full account of New Zealand’s Zealandia cult in the 1890s and beyond see Corballis (‘Zealandia 1855-2005’ and ‘Serenades and Portraits’).

in costumes representing Victory, Britannia and Peace...' (Ellis 137). Perhaps the most striking of these images was the illuminated address presented to Major Alfred Robin, the commander of the First Contingent, on his return from the war in 1901:

[The frontispiece] depicts Zealandia, clad in white with a cloak made from the New Zealand flag, flanked by a trooper and a Maori chief and between greenstone columns topped with statues of kiwis. She descends from the podium into the arms of the victorious Robin, his sword at his side. (Ellis 139)

A good many poems (not many of them good) were penned for the occasion. A few of these gently acknowledged the darker side of the war. For example, C.D. Mackintosh's song *We Sail for Home Today* (words by Laura E. Holyoake) depicts a 'gentle lady' who sadly watches her 'own dear boy' sail for South Africa and waits for the news that the title conveys. More substantial is 'First to Fall' (by 'Macander'), which depicts a sorrowing Zealandia grieving for the loss of her children, a pose often struck by Britannia in times of war and Hibernia (*alias* Kathleen ni Houlihan) during its long subjection to British rule. On the whole, however, the poets of the time were happy to pen jingoistic verses such as William Skey's vapid *Patriotic Rhymes* 'on the occasion of the departure of the Rough Riders Contingent for South Africa' and the following (by a certain 'J.L.')

... Zealandia's sons have shown
That in the Empire's righteous cause
They too can hold their own –
... They never quailed and never failed
To make the feathers fly.

These jingoistic verses take on greater significance when they celebrate New Zealand's coming of age as a nation. W. Belworthy's words for J.H. Phillpot's *Sons of the Empire: Patriotic Song* (1899), for example, go so far as to suggest that Britain and New Zealand are now sisters:

Britannia still can hold her own as mistress of the seas,
The grand old flag, the Union Jack, still flutters in the breeze;
And by its side, whate'er betide, unheeding gain or loss,
Shall float the bars and silver stars of Zealandia's Southern Cross.

The chorus of J. Pooley's *Honour the Brave* 'published for the benefit of the War Fund, and respectfully dedicated to Major Robin and all our brave New Zealand Sons who volunteer their services in Africa', similarly sets the two women side-by-side:

Hurrah, hurrah, Britannia!
Three cheers for our stout youthful sons!
Hurrah, hurrah, Zealandia!
Brave lads to silence Kruger guns.

Britannia was not altogether comfortable with this arrangement. In the nicest possible way, the Colonial Secretary (Sir Joseph Chamberlain) put

Zealandia back in her place in a speech to the House of Commons on 14 May 2000:

Her Majesty's Government and the people of this country are under special obligations to the Government and people of New Zealand. (*Cheers.*) Of all the colonies, all the possessions of her Majesty, including Canada and all the colonies of Australia... New Zealand, in proportion to her population, supplied the largest contingent to aid her Majesty's forces, and made the greatest sacrifices. (*Cheers.*) ... I am told that, according to population, the New Zealand contingent in South Africa is equivalent to an army sent from this country of 107,000 men. (*Cheers.*) I do think that this is extraordinary proof of – what shall I say – of affection and regard for the mother country....

Beneath all the New Zealand hyperbole, however, lay an ambition that ensured – at least for a short time – the extension of the colonial ethic in New Zealand.⁸ The refusal to join the Australian Commonwealth and the determination to maintain a very close relationship with Britain were both prompted by the fact that New Zealand ('the Britain of the South' as the colonisers liked to call it) was endeavouring to establish – with Britain's help – its very own empire in the South Pacific. In his contribution to the jubilee of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1890, John Liddell Kelly had anticipated the issue thus:

Here, by the Old World's woes unsmitten,
Free from the givings of Caste and Class,
Rises a Greater and Brighter Britain,
Proud and free, while the ages pass....
Grant her, Heaven, a high ambition,
Upright rulers and servants pure,
Grace and power for her noble mission –
Founding an Empire, firm and sure.
ZEALANDIA, then, from her central station,
Clasping a thousand leagues of sea,
Shall spread her sway o'er an Island Nation,
And usher a grander Jubilee. (23)

⁸ There were other, more narrowly imperial reasons for eschewing the Federation. When the matter was first debated in the New Zealand House of Representatives, Captain William Russell argued that it would be better 'to form a distinct race for ourselves in the colony of New Zealand, rather than amalgamate with other colonies and have our characteristics probably very materially changed by doing so' (*New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* lxxix (1890), 586). According to Keith Sinclair, Russell meant that 'to mix with the Australians (the inferiority of whose stock remains an article of New Zealand faith)' would corrupt the superior culture of New Zealand (Sinclair 19-20). Members of the 1901 Commission that considered the feasibility of entering the Commonwealth were likewise assured by one William Curzon-Suggers that 'the moral tone of the New Zealander is superior to that of the Australian, especially when you go amongst the poor' (New Zealand National Archives, Agency IA, Series 106, 14 February 1901).

This grandiose vision, promoted with typical exuberance by Prime Minister Richard Seddon a decade later,⁹ was short-lived (though New Zealand did manage to annex the Cook Islands), but it brought about a delayed progression from the first to the second stage of *The Empire's* paradigm. This progression, most would probably argue, came just a few years later, when New Zealand and Australian troops went to Gallipoli to fight side by side in another of Britain's mismanaged wars.

Such were the rather different developments in these two settler colonies during the Boer War and its aftermath. But in New Zealand there was another response, almost invisible at the time, but of considerable importance in later years. It was a response that Australia could not share, since clause 127 of the new Australian Constitution (repealed in 1967) stipulated that 'in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a state or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted'. New Zealand's Maori, on the other hand, were entitled to be 'counted'. Most backed the British in the War. Indeed a considerable number were keen to enlist, but, despite Seddon's efforts, they were 'vetoed by the British authorities, who had a policy of not employing "native" troops in South Africa in what was to be a "white man's war"' (Crawford and Ellis, 32)¹⁰ – a policy that would be applied to rugby football in due course. These Maori had to be content with various kinds of support, notably fund-raising, though a number of them did manage to serve, using Anglicised versions of their names. There were, however, a few tribes that backed the Boers. Lord Ranfurly (the Governor General at the time) surmised that 'pro-Boer and German priests... whip[ped] up support for Britain's enemy' (McGibbon 116), but Reweti Kohere – himself a supporter of the British – perceptively observed that these Maori had sensed a parallel between their own past grievances and those of the Boers with respect to the loss of land: 'There are many Maori supporting the Boers' side, due to

⁹ In May 1900 (when federation with Australia was being debated in Westminster and Chamberlain was praising New Zealand's generous contribution to the Boer War) Seddon set out on a tour of the South Pacific Islands. He made a favourable impression throughout the region, but Britain opted to retain her colonies and protectorates, leaving only the Cook Islands for New Zealand to administer.

¹⁰ This policy was not always scrupulously observed; both sides recruited Africans from time to time. The way things were supposed to be was memorably spelled out by General Cronje on 29 October 1899 in a message to Colonel Baden-Powell: 'It is understood that you have armed Bastards, Fingos and Baralongs against us – in this you have committed an enormous act of wickedness... reconsider the matter, even if it cost you the loss of Mafeking... disarm your blacks and thereby act the part of a white man in a white man's war' (quoted in Pakenham 396). The Boer's surrender document likewise complained that 'the Kaffir tribes ... are mostly armed and are taking part in the war against us...' (Kruger 503). On the other hand Kruger notes that 'the Boers had not in the past been above arming Natives' (423).

thinking that the real reason for the war in Transvaal is the English desire for the Boers' land' (quoted in Paterson).

Kohere was broad-minded enough to follow his logic through to the plight of the South African blacks (much worse than that of the Boers): 'Our misfortunes are real,' he wrote, 'yet... our misfortunes are nothing like those impacting on the maori people of Transvaal' (quoted in Paterson).¹¹ At about the same time in Cape Colony, Olive Schreiner was pleading the case of the blacks (in very imperial language): 'If there is a fight for the Lord of Hosts, if there is a fight for truth and justice, for suppressing violence and wrong, for saving a race (native) who do not have the power to save themselves whose cries of pain have reached heaven and the Lord has come down to save them, then this is that fight' (quoted in Paterson).

At the conclusion of the Boer War 'Kitchener shook hands with the Boer leaders. "We are good friends now," he said' (Kruger 505). He went on to assure the old enemy 'that no disgrace attached to a defeat inflicted by overwhelming forces. If he had been one of them he would have been proud to have done as well as they...' (Kruger 505-6). When the defeated Boers swore to 'acknowledge King Edward to be [their] liege Sovereign', it must have seemed that the old imperial ethos had been restored. The swift regeneration of the Boers in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State rocked the boat only slightly since it simply replaced one form of imperialism with another. But in several corners of the globe, settlers and indigenous peoples alike had identified cracks in the imperial façade; 'anti-imperial ... subversion' had become possible. The First World War delayed further investigation of these cracks (except in Ireland), but the experience of a Second World War, which hopelessly debilitated the European imperial powers, very often turned 'subversion' into confrontation. That, of course, is another story – a much more complex story than the collected fragments of second-stage 'anti-imperial potential' (Ashcroft *et al* 6) thrown up by the Boer War. Subtler scholars than I are needed to tell this story, and we have just lost one of the best of them.

¹¹ Paterson explains that the word 'maori' was at this time used to describe all indigenous peoples, not just those of New Zealand.

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