

**A Black (English)man writing a white man's war: Sol Plaatje's<sup>1</sup> *Boer War Diary***

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## 1 Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In 1899 Boer and Briton fought a white man's war to decide, among other things, the future of Black South Africa. In a protest note to Baden-Powell during the siege of Mafeking<sup>3</sup>, the besieging Boers said: "It is understood that you have armed bastards, Fingoes and Barolongs against us. In this you have committed an enormous act ... the end of which no man can foresee ... disarm your blacks and act the part of a white man in a white man's war". This was essentially how things would end, for the peace treaties between Boers and British and the terms of the unification of South Africa soon made it clear that the interests of the Boers were of far greater importance to the British than the rights of the Africans. Lord Milner put this bluntly in the British ideal for South Africa, of a "self-governing white community, supported by well-treated and justly-governed black labour from Cape Town to the Zambesi".

<sup>1</sup> Solomon Thekisho Plaatje was a descendant of the Barolong royal house. His parents were committed Christians via the Lutheran church. His first name is indicative of his Christian faith, and his second name, which means "judgement" in Setswana, is intended to reflect the importance of his Barolong ancestry. His surname, which is a Dutch word roughly translatable as "flat" was bestowed on an ancestor by a Dutch farmer – "oral tradition would have it that the name was derived from the shape of Selogilwe's head. The name stuck and was retained by Kushumane [Plaatje's father] and his descendants" (Midgley, 1997:12).

<sup>2</sup> Because of the fact that Plaatje worked for a large part of this productive life in what is now the North West Province, there has been a considerable amount interest in his life and work. His work, especially *Native Life in South Africa* (1913) is also of enormous significance within the framework of the process of land restitution that has been initiated since the 1994 elections.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the town is in reality "Mafikeng", a Setswana word meaning "the place of the rocks". It became corrupted in the English mouth, but has since been restored to its original meaning. It is adjacent to Mmabatho, the capital of the North West Province of South Africa (since 1994).

## 1.1 Biographical Background on Plaatje<sup>4</sup> and general remarks about the *Diary*

Plaatje spent much of his youth at Pniel in the Orange Free State (now the Free State Province of South Africa). His family, as staunch Lutherans, were able to reside near the local mission station. Having been born in 1877 near Boshof the move to Pniel was significant for Plaatje, for at the Lutheran Mission School and the nearby Church of England mission, he was to receive all the formal education he was to have. He learned English, reading, writing and arithmetic, and reading and writing in his mother tongue. He only continued with his formal schooling up to Standard Three (this would be five years of formal schooling). After becoming a postman in Kimberley, he furthered his self-education<sup>5</sup>. By 1898 he had become the official interpreter at the Kimberley Magistrate's Court, had taken the Cape Civil Service examination and topped the (multiracial) list of candidates. He also topped the list when he wrote a typewriting exam. He ultimately took up a position as interpreter at the Mafeking Magistrate's court, and this is where the war found him. The siege was to bring the three parties in his life, Boer, Briton and the Barolong tribe to which he belonged into direct confrontation. It is to be remembered that in the 1870s, South Africa was more a geographical expression than a political entity. It consisted of a sparsely populated but remarkably diverse collection of societies, both African<sup>6</sup> and European in origin, linked in a pattern of relationships that ranged from extremes of peaceful interdependence to outright warfare. It was in Plaatje's lifetime that the relatively flexible society hardened into an increasingly formalized system of racial discrimination

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<sup>4</sup> "As diarist, novelist, pamphleteer, translator, linguist, journalist, musician, politician and social critic, Sol Plaatje's impact on South African society is significant. His work is of interest to both literary and social historians as he is the only black South African to have kept an account of the Anglo-Boer War and also the writer of both the first political treatise and of the first Anglophone novel [*Mhudi*] by a black South African" (Midgley, 1997:54).

<sup>5</sup> His self-education included an astounding foray into the world of languages: he was fluent in English, Dutch (from which Afrikaans developed), Sesotho, Setswana, isiXhosa and German (learnt at the mission station). Plaatje also played a pioneering role in the establishment of Setswana orthography, and had a long-standing working relationship with Daniel Jones.

<sup>6</sup> The combined effect of European colonization and African wars of attrition led to this situation. The effect of the mfecane or scattering of the tribes during the nineteenth century left many Barolong without resistance as Mzilikazi's troops occupied Barolong territory (in the area where Pilanesberg is situated) and many of them fled to the safety of mission stations.

and exclusive white control. At the time of outbreak of the war, Plaatje was working in Mafeking, and would be an important figure there in journalistic and legal circles. He reported, in the *Diary*, on a large part of the siege which would last 217 days, and which has been described as having been a curious military enterprise, with mixed results on either side.

## 1.2 The *Diary*

Diary-writing is not a literary medium that has proved popular among the black South African writers, even in more recent times, and there had been no public mention of the diary prior to the happy accident of its discovery. It is speculated that “this was a convenient way of exercising the novel phrases over which the author questioned Vere Stent<sup>7</sup> and others ... from the manner in which it was kept, its obvious tone of privacy, it is clear that Plaatje had no thoughts about ever publishing it”.

The *Diary* has been called “an extraordinarily valuable find ...”, “Self-deprecating and witty”, “Written in an easy and informal style, ... stylistically the diary displays immense linguistic sensitivity” (cf. Comaroff, 1973).

## 1.3 “Placing” Plaatje as an Englishman

Herman Fourie succinctly sums up the prevailing situation by stating that “Many of those who played an active part [in the war in general and in Mafeking in particular], like Plaatje himself, thought of themselves as black Englishmen and joined in the battle because they thought an English victory would help champion their rights” (1983:6). Yet, and this echoes what was said in the introduction, Plaatje ultimately had few illusions about his position. In later years he would, while still regarding himself as a black Englishman, maintain that “Blacks are British objects, not British subjects”. This is present in embryo in the *Diary*, when he says that “I am wondering if the Heavens, like the Imperial Government, have also shut their ears to our prayers” (in the entry for Sunday, the 18th of February, 1900). In his editorial notes, it is suggested that “there

were persistent rumours that Baden-Powell wished to prolong the siege, thereby causing unnecessary hardship to the population. The threat to morale that this gossip was posing prompted Baden-Powell's letter of denial at the end of the month" (The Colonel on Grouching: "Grouching is generally the outcome of funk on the part of the individual who grouches, and I hope that every right-minded man who hears any of it will shut it up with an appropriate remark, or the toe of his boot. Cavillers should keep quiet until the siege is over and then they are welcome to write or talk until they are blue in the face" (Diary, p. ).

However, Plaatje throughout firmly supported the British position, and he even had gradations of disgust when it came to the Boers. He states that

It was a miserable scene to be surrounded by about 50 hungry beings, agitating the engagement of your pity and to see one of them succumb to his agonies and fall backwards with a dead thud. Surely those Transvaal Boers are **abominable**. I really do not think they are children of the same Dutchland as the inhabitants of the OFS. No wonder their President was a judge while Oom Paul was a "**schaapwachter**" [a shepherd – considered to be a menial job that white men did not generally engage in] (1973:142).

## 2 Language usage

In the body of the paper, I intend to explore some striking instances of his language usage by way of analysing the ways in which he attempted to give substance to his attitudes, hopes and aspirations. It is a tentative first attempt to come to grips with his language usage in the *Diary*, which is different from his language usage in his later writings that had been intended for publication<sup>8</sup>. There is an intimate and unguarded quality about the language of the *Diary* that, inspected closely, serves to reveal a great deal about Plaatje's sense of identity and his frustrated awareness, even this early, of the potential for betrayal that he would experience throughout his life. The

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<sup>7</sup> The Reuters correspondent in Mafeking at the time of the war.

<sup>8</sup> The register and style employed in his "formal" writings, as opposed to the *Diary*, are very different. Plaatje had a great respect for language and always made sure that his writings were meticulously correct, even to the point of being pedantic.

investigation of the language usage is done largely within the context of the notion of code-switching.

The linguistic phenomena will be explored in terms of the following:

2.1 Linguistic devices involved in the creation of identity – “attitude” quotes to underscore his views and to give a sense of his own identity crisis with regard to the situation in which he found himself. These tend to set the tone and register of the *Diary*.

2.2 Language usage

2.2.1 New English words: The new English words to be savoured are used with abandon (added to this, curiously stilted expressions, as well as formal, pedantic expressions).

2.2.2 Code-switching; Tone and register

2.3 Use of musical metaphors

2.1 Linguistic devices involved in establishing identity (Attitude quotes)

- “Boers are fond of shooting. They do not wait until they see anything, but let go at the rate of 100 rounds per minute at the least provocation.”
- “Distant howls in the Dutch Reformed Church told that they held service there ...”
- “Mafikeng has since its creation never been cursed by being a Boer Laager” (69)
- “The Boers got the best of the fame, as usual. Our **plucky** fellows had to come home disappointed” (112);
- “The English are among the foremost warriors of the day. Here we have only a few soldiers representing the wisdom of their nation in a most demonstrative manner. They not only invent miracles but know how to utilize them at random, under thunder and lightning, through all circumstances” (75).
- “The following is the result of the season’s fixtures between Baden-Powell’s 500 and Cronje’s 10 times that number: BP 287 (what a licking!), Cronje 19”.

- “BP’s chappies showed them that they had something nasty for Boer flesh in store in Mafeking” (94);
- “Instead of getting brighter, the prospect in front of us is darkening itself. I am inclined to believe that the Boers have fully justified their bragging, for we are **citizens** of a town of subjects of the richest and the strongest empire on earth, and the **Burghers** of a small state have successfully besieged us for three months.”
- “Boers hammering away at us in a most extraordinary manner. Goodness knows what provoked them.” (100)
- “We have great difficulty feeding the Natives.” (113);

## 2.2 Language usage

Plaatje at this stage in his life, while still only 23, had already mastered English and Dutch to a remarkable degree. He had passed important public examinations in both English and Dutch, and was working as a court interpreter, as indicated earlier. He ultimately became fluent in eight languages. His attitude towards language is well-expressed in the following statement:

Vere StentReuters correspondent and later editor of the *Pretoria News*, wrote of his first encounter with Plaatje, after he had advertised for a secretary/typist: I hear you need a secretary/typist, sir.  
Well, so I do. Is your master one?  
I haven’t a master, said Plaatje with a faint smile, but I write shorthand and can use the typewriter.  
He spoke perfect English ... to begin with, he could spell, which I can’t and never could. He was quick on the machine ... 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.** As to what would now be called a liaison officer ... he was invaluable.

### 2.2.1 *New English words*

The new English words to be savoured are used with abandon:

- Their weapons were imprecated by empyrean authority ... (38)

- he promptly advanced to meet the ephemeral conquerors of Mafeking
- the fellow being an amateur interpreter was completely flabbergasted when it came to cross-examination, and I took his place to immense advantage ..
- the following blood-stirring execrable lie (49)
- the hard ox is not very desirable when palatable mutton is knocking about (61).
- Their soliloquies were so far retrenched by the perilousness of their position that in their cogitation there was only room for the one word God; and they yearned for the company of his Angels more than they cared to meditate sin. But now we have so far forgotton ourselves as to imagine that this failure was attributable not to Providential Protection but to Cronjé's misfortune and our good luck, or to his cowardice and our valour - what an odd notion (64).
- She fed me with the first issues of her fructirous grove in fruits and greeneries (77);
- the **toesins** chimed (83); used more than once (and clearly intended to be **tocsin**). This is used again - "when tingalingaling chimed the toesins (119);
- The old fellah would be so miserable under the exuberance of the damning drink as not to recognize the rest of them (84);
- the tranquillity of the morning was severely marred by the tolling of the warning bell (105);
- some marvellously narrow **escapades** (113);

Throughout a curiously stilted clichéd use of expressions (the result of a missionary education): they have nipped everyone of them in the bud (37), they were sorely disappointed (37), Struck the pate of a picanniny (43); severely wounded a chappie that was playing on the other side of it (63); I felt quite seedy the moment I packed up (76); Report II was pert and pithy (81); David cleared helter-skelter with the coffee (92); we had some swagger dinner - roast beef and the rarest vegetables, and various other dainties (101); they reach their fag end (102);

Also use of formal expressions (civil service legacy): in extenso, per diem, 15th ultimo, to give more credence to a Kaffir ipse dixit than we formerly have done (74); sine die (95);

## 2.2 Code-switching; Tone and register

Perhaps because he had no need for the careful correction which would mark his later work, Plaatje indulged freely in the use of words and phrases from Dutch, Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu. But the usage is not random, as it tends to correspond to the structure of the relationships and situations described by the author. Comaroff has indicated that there is a clear sociological relevance in the code-switching - “because the diary constitutes private, unedited composition, it represents a type of literary Rorschach test in a cross-cultural context, providing thereby an insight into an African’s choice of English where this is not his mother tongue” (p. 23).

He starts off the Diary with a blunt reflection:

Sunday 29th (October 1899). Divine services. No thunder. **Haikonna** terror. This establishes some kind of practice, as there are numerous instances of the use of indigenous languages Sotho, Tswana and Zulu, at times simply a word interspersed,

- they nona with horseflesh (become fat) (93)
- his people ncoma his coughing (97) (recommend, praise)
- Mafeking has setlhabi (angina pectoris) (97)
- I cannot say if it was in consequence of the long medupe (100) - gentle rain, long continued)

These single words would at times be alternated by whole sentences or paragraphs in Setswana, which would then clearly be a sort of very private reflection which needed a different medium for proper expression.

A Dutch reference: “The Boers were advancing towards the koppie like a swarm of **voetgangers**. (Attitude.) I wonder why the Boers are so **kwaai** today (63); They have turned their attention away from the **Rooiniks** and have decided to knock spots out of the **verdomde Kaffirs** this morning (93); **He was tripeling very fast and as he**

**is loath to turn quickly he ran plump into the wire fence. I tlolela (jump) on one side (115); and all that for niks (125);**

### 2.3 Use of especially musical metaphors

Musical metaphor. P. 34.

The musical metaphor, referring to Western musical terms, a recurrent one, which gradually fades away and disappears completely towards the end of the diary, where the relatively florid style become pared down and matter-of-fact.

A further example of this (p. 48): Instead of the usual blood-stirring clapper of Mausers, we are having that music so delightful to the ear when our guns are firing” (48), and on p. 49 : “They were quickly silenced and we enjoyed that sweet and enchanting music from our musketeers. It gave us an entertainment of the sweetest music imaginable when slow volley after volley was directed at the angry Boers; now and then a 7-pounder would harmonize the proceedings with an occasional boom in sweet bombardment, and the whole of the proceedings is as safe as at an altar”.

Intense awareness of nature throughout - the diary is liberally peppered with references to the weather, and especially to rain.

Food: p.121

Awareness of suffering:

- p. 60 - this is an abominable life
- p.95: I was a broken reed all yesterday
- p. 104: The same hammering by the big gun. It is the lot of a beleaguered community and we are awfully tired of it.
  - It was soon to lift the people to a pinnacle of hope and then to drop them again into despair (106);
  - 142: It was a miserable scene to be surrounded by about 50 hungry beings, agitating the engagement of your pity and to see one of them succumb to his agonies and fall backwards with a dead thud. Surely those Transvaal Boers are abominable. I really do not think they are children of the same Dutchland as the inhabitants of the OFS. No wonder their President was a judge while Oom Paul was a “schaapwachter”.

## **Conclusion**

The diary ends with an entry on Friday 30 April, still some time away from the end of the siege. The final entry is simply (p. 150): \*\*\*

The Diary is not merely a record of the siege of Mafeking, it is a portrait of the development of a young African intellectual in an era during which the future of his people was being moulded. At the heart of the Diary lie many of the themes that would become commonplace in Plaatje's work. The Diary, unlike his later work, is not

carefully edited by the author, and thus does not have the literary perfection of his later work.

Slides

Sol Plaatje young man, old man - 301

Map of the town in relation to Pretoria and other cities

First page of diary

Daniel Jones, p 287

This can perhaps be borne out by the repeated comments about the personal discomfort experienced through the lack of food - twice on one page 121 he refers to food – “one of the greatest troubles I have endured during the Siege is that I have been put on rations. Thus food becomes one of the greatest desires of a man’s dreams, on it he would spend all his money if he could”. A further endearing little personal note is the following: “I felt very stimulated and invigorated by them (some sweet cones) and tired of novel reading and shorthand exercises” (119). A little later he would make the following comment: “ .. this morning while at Court I was **practising shorthand** and I find the following ...” (on March 20 1900 – thus towards the end of the siege).

### **Bibliography**

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