

Loyalty and Betrayal: themes in the writing of Sol T Plaatje

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The South African War of 1899-1902 left many bitter legacies, and spawned many myths that have been actively deployed in the South African political debate from then to the present. There would appear to be three dominant traditions regarding the interpretation of the causes, course and aftermath of this conflict. First there are the interpretations offered by Afrikaner nationalists and historians, which can be summarised as follows: the war was yet another manifestation of “perfidious Albion” bent on destroying Afrikaner cultural and religious values and stealing their mineral wealth. Secondly there are the explanations offered in defence of British imperialism and the benefits it was deemed to bestow on those who lived under its sway. Thirdly an answer to the questions surrounding the war were sought in the demands of capitalism, which made both the Africans and Afrikaners victims of imperial aggression fronting for global capital. However, there is one caveat to this last explanation in that although the Afrikaners were deemed to be victims of the machinations of world capitalism, they were allowed to emerge as political victors in the post-war settlement. The political power attained by the Afrikaners after 1902 was no accident but a deliberate strategy. The new political masters of the country could be relied on to implement “the most ruthless deprivation of the land of our people”.¹ There is an element of irony in this comment as a contemporary of Nzo’s believed that both African and Afrikaner had fallen victim to British imperialism and capital.² Nevertheless early commentators, such as Plaatje, who are the focus of this paper, were aware of this apparent contradiction.

The whole debate surrounding the South African War is perhaps best encapsulated in the evolution of the terminology used to describe the conflagration. All of the names

¹ A Nzo, “Our Anti-Imperialist Commitment”. An article by Alfred Nzo, Secretary General of the ANC, in *Sechaba*, February 1970, quoted in ANC, *ANC Speaks...*, p. 78 and JK Ngubane, *Ushaba: The Hurtle to Blood River*, p. 282.

² BM Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, pp. 102-3.

ranging from “Kruger se Oorlog”³, to “Engelse Oorlog”, “Boer War”, “Tweede Vryheids Oorlog” to the more recent appellation of “Anglo-Boer War” to the most recent name of “South African War” all express a specific agenda. What these agendas are need no further consideration here. However, with the exception of the last name, one could be forgiven for thinking that this was a war fought between whites, the Boer and British. As a consequence how blacks were involved in, experienced and reacted to the war has largely been ignored. It should be noted that there are two notable exceptions to this criticism of contemporary historical writing.⁴ There can be little doubt that these two historians did much to fill in the lacunae in the historical writing on the South African war. Therefore what follows should not be seen as pioneering work on black participation in the South African war, but as an attempt to highlight how the war was used by black commentators of the time to underscore political demands.

With reference to the term “South African War” when this question is discussed with my students⁵ they frequently argue that while the logic behind opting for this description is valid it still overlooks that the war was fought over resources which neither Boer nor Brit could rightfully claim as “theirs”. These students can more closely identify with the views of Black writers writing from the perspective of the 1970s and beyond. After all the Boers had obtained control over the resources by “fraud and subterfuge”.⁶ Britain had instigated the war to replace the “feudalistic slavery” of the Boers with a more “benefiting wage labour”.⁷ Therefore this nomenclature is viewed with some scepticism and dismissed as an attempt to obscure the fact that Africans were deprived of their heritage.

With these considerations and qualifications in mind one can now turn to Plaatje’s work *Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*. Plaatje’s actual experiences of the war are vividly described in his

³ A term used by a 112-year old Calvinia resident in response to what she remembered of the South African War during an interview on E.TV News at 19h00 on February 8, 1999.

⁴ SB Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics, January 1900 – May 1902*; P Warwick, *Black people and the South African War, 1899-1902*; and, P Warwick (ed) and SB Spies (advisory editor), *The South African War. The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*.

⁵ Third year history students at Vista University, Mamelodi Campus.

⁶ ANC, *ANC Speaks...*, p. 77.

⁷ D Dube, *The Rise of Azania. The Fall of South Africa*, pp. 36-7.

war-time diary.⁸ The general tone of the diary seems to suggest that the war had “its moral and material value.”⁹ Similarly Plaatje would not have differed from the views of H Selby Msimang in that Blacks “were made to understand and sincerely believed that the war was being fought for their liberation from Boer domination” for which many had “lost their lives in the belief that they were making sacrifices for their liberation”.¹⁰ Even when Blacks were becoming increasingly angered by Boer attacks and stock theft in the western Transvaal,¹¹ they were confronted with the “uncanny white man’s mode of reasoning” that the “war was a white man’s business” chiefs, like Lentswe of the Bakgatla, argued that Blacks were part of the British empire and obliged to fight.¹² As further evidence of Black loyalty to the empire Plaatje refers to African leaders who traversed the country to dissuade others from exploiting Britain’s predicament to regain their independence.¹³ It should, however, be noted that not all Blacks were motivated by some deep-seated fealty to the British crown.¹⁴ Those who had acted out of loyalty on the assumption that this would be rewarded in a post-war settlement were to be bitterly disillusioned by the contents of the Treaty of Vereeniging and subsequent developments. Blacks had hoped to see the banner of freedom unfurled after the war, but all they saw was the flag of Union waving in the winds of political change that swept over the sub-continent after peace was concluded.¹⁵ Instead of enjoying the fruits of victory, Blacks became serfs in their homeland, overseen by an imperial government that was deaf to their entreaties.¹⁶ It was rapidly becoming clear that Blacks could not confidently leave their cause in the hands of the imperial power which purported to be acting out of “its anxiety to do the best for all classes”.¹⁷ Reminders of African loyalty were not aimed at material gain but at the “maintenance of the open door we now ask for”.¹⁸ The “open door” was that of the British High Commissioner, which would allow African direct access to

⁸ JL Comaroff (ed), *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje: An African at Mafeking*.

⁹ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 275.

¹⁰ HS Msimang, *H Selby Msimang looks back*, p. 4.

¹¹ JL Comaroff (ed), *The Boer War Diary...*, pp. 33-5.

¹² ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 276.

¹³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 245.

¹⁴ WRL Gebhard, *Shades of Reality: Black Perceptions of South African History*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁵ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 125.

¹⁶ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 292.

¹⁷ Statement by the Executive of the SANC, “Questions Affecting the Natives and Coloured People Resident in British South Africa”, p. 18.

the British government, as it was becoming increasingly clear that none of the colonial governments would be sympathetic to African claims. Interestingly, in the same editorial Plaatje stakes a claim for the enfranchisement of women, subject to the same qualifications that applied to the “sterner sex”.¹⁹ At the same time the themes and tone that Plaatje was to use in *Native Life* were evident in the following extract from the editorial previously cited.

*Presently under the British Constitution every MAN so qualified is his neighbour's equal, therefore anyone who argues to the contrary, or imagines himself the political superior of his fellow subjects, is a rebel at heart.*²⁰

By definition then all Boers were “rebels at heart”, as Plaatje consistently refers to the Boers racial prejudices, and how these prejudices had been at the root of the Great Trek. Therefore the Great Trek was evidence of Boer betrayal. The heritage of betrayal was sustained during the South African War and the 1914 Rebellion. [The 1914 Rebellion was a mutiny by South African troops and officers against the South African invasion of German South West Africa at the behest of Britain. The officers and men involved in the revolt were Afrikaners.] More significantly, the treasonous legacy also found expression in the legislative programme followed by the Union government after 1910.

The political dilemma of Plaatje and other members of the educated, and frequently enfranchised, elite was evident in the introduction to this editorial when he warns against “equal rights” being seen as encouragement to the “renegade Kaffir who desires to court and marry your daughter” which would result in a “generation of half-castes, and the total obliteration of our race and colour, both of which are very dear to us”. Therefore every “black man [should] avoid social contact with the whites, and the other races [should] ... keep strictly within their boundaries”.²¹ The dilemma lay in the fact that while the elite wished to be included in the body politic they were well aware that the white electorate was nurturing fears over “swamping”, which were

¹⁸ ST Plaatje, Editorial, ‘Equal rights’, *Bechuana Gazette*, 13 September 1903, in B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, p. 64.

¹⁹ ST Plaatje, Editorial, ‘Equal rights’, *Bechuana Gazette*, 13 September 1903, p. 64.

²⁰ ST Plaatje, Editorial, ‘Equal rights’, *Bechuana Gazette*, 13 September 1903, p. 64. [Emphasis added]

²¹ ST Plaatje, Editorial, ‘Equal rights’, *Bechuana Gazette*, 13 September 1903, p. 64.

masked behind racist claptrap like their daughters marrying Blacks. Therefore a distinction had to be drawn between the elite and the “renegades”. At this stage it appears that Plaatje’s thoughts and writing were directed at a white South African audience. He was, after all, addressing the purported concerns of white fathers, who also made up the bulk of the electorate. Thus one might conclude that he still believed that an appeal to reason from South African whites could still bear fruit. However, the sense of betrayal that had already surfaced after the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging proved to be the correct one.

South African political developments between 1902 and 1910 showed that the future South Africa would indeed be shaped by an attitude that echoed the Middle Ages and “a feeling of some ‘divine mission’ to exploit the Bantu.”²² The rapid political rehabilitation of the Boers and their political ascendancy at the time of the National Convention between October 1908 and May 1909 was merely part of a relentless historical pattern that saw the triumph of a “gross, brute spirit”.²³ The spirit that Plaatje refers to is the assumed racial prejudice of the Boers. He feels embittered that the vanquished, who had supposedly suffered defeat because of their policies had been presented with the gift of Union. This magnanimity allowed them not only to continue their much-maligned racial policies, but also to extend them to the Cape and Natal.²⁴ Whether the blame for the nature of the constitution can be placed solely at the door of Boers is debatable. There were only two dissenting votes from the Cape when the draft constitution was presented to the colonial parliaments for approval.²⁵ The other parliaments of the Orange River Colony, Transvaal and Natal voted unanimously in support of the draft constitution. Despite the sop to the Cape franchise, entrenched under section 35 of the Union of South Africa Act, sanctioned by the British parliament and royal seal and implemented on May 31 1910, the constitution of the newly founded Union of South Africa was blatantly racist. Had there been even the slightest hope of humanity from the new legislature the passage of the Mines and Works Act in 1911 and the Natives Land Act of 1913 very quickly disabused anyone harbouring such notions. The foundations for the modern South

²² SM Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, p. 247.

²³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. xiii.

²⁴ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 391.

African state, marked by job reservation, land dispossession, labour coercion and political oppression had been cast. As Plaatje was to remark in 1919:-

*The root of the evil involved in the legislative tendencies of the Union Parliament lies in the Act of Union which excluded coloured taxpayers from the exercise of the franchise. The result is that no matter how loudly they protest against an accumulation of wrongs, the legislature is not obliged to take any notice of their protests. A dozen of sympathetic members of Parliament have now and again delivered weighty protests against the anti-colour excesses of the Union Parliament, but in a house of 130 members, their protests had about the same effect as a drop in a bucket of water.*²⁶

The sense of disillusionment with the failure of the intercessions of the “dozen of sympathetic” parliamentarians was heightened when the Natives’ Land Act bill was tabled in parliament. Clearly there would be cold comfort coming from parliament. Plaatje’s description of the prelude to and the enactment of the Natives’ Land Act of 1913 are more than adequately described in *Native Life...* and need no further discussion here, except to comment that the reader is always aware of the shrill contrast between the relative well-being of the vanquished and the dire circumstances under which the Africans affected by the Natives’ Land Act evictions lived. What is of concern here is the shift that had taken place in the location of Plaatje’s audience and how he intended to gain the support of this audience.

The South African Native National Congress (SANNC) had been formed in 1912, against the background of the government’s increasingly oppressive “legislative tendencies”. This programme made it abundantly clear that Africans would have to speak with one voice and overcome provincial and ethnic differences. At this stage, however, there was no clear articulation of the need to overcome class differences. In fact there was little or no co-operation between the SANNC and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), because the former looked upon the latter as too radical, and given to a rhetoric that would antagonise those the leaders, like Plaatje, were trying to address. It was also apparent that redress of their grievances would not come from within South Africa. At least not via the constitutional means that the

²⁵ LM Thompson, “The Compromise of Union”, in M Wilson and LM Thompson, (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa. Volume II South Africa 1870-1966*, p. 349.

²⁶ ST Plaatje, *Some of the Legal Disabilities Suffered by the Native Population of the Union of South Africa*, in B Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, p. 250.

African leadership of the time was advocating. Meetings, conventions, deputations and petitions had produced no amelioration of the lot of Africans. White political representatives could afford to ignore the entreaties of the disenfranchised. Largely they lacked either the will or inclination to respond to Black protests. Who then would listen and act? The SANNC identified Britain as the most likely source of succour. The question then arises that if allies were to be found in Britain, how would these allies be activated and mobilised to the point that they would persuade the British government to intervene in the rapidly worsening situation in South Africa?

After overcoming some internal tensions about the advisability of sending a delegation to London to protest against the implementation of the Natives' Land Act — fostered by Louis Botha — Plaatje, JL Dube, Walter Rubusana, Thomas Mapikela and Saul Msane set sail for England on May 16 and May 17, 1914.²⁷ Thus the delegates set off to England charged by the SANNC to ultimately bring their petition to the king who, it was hoped, would rescind the offending South African statute. According to Willan none of the delegates actually had much faith in the constitutional path they were following. In fact, in a rather cryptic comment Willan states that the deputation, while still at sea, on “the whole ... would not have cared to contemplate what happened next.”²⁸ Plaatje sought to finish “compiling a little book on the Native Land Act”²⁹ while at sea, to be used in the campaign to arouse sufficient public sentiment to put pressure on the British ministers and ultimately the king.³⁰

On arrival in England the delegation met with Burton and Harris of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society respectively. Harris's first instruction to the delegation was that under no circumstances were they to address the press. Thus he effectively eliminated a significant component of their strategy to put pressure on the British monarch. Ironically Harris, a representative of an organisation which the British government, especially the Secretary for the Colonies, Lord Harcourt, considered to be an insignificant nuisance led the delegation in a direction that they could not have conceived of in their wildest dreams. Harris drew up a discussion document which came out in support of the segregatory aspects of the Natives' Land

²⁷ B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, pp. 172-3.

²⁸ B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, p. 173.

²⁹ B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, p. 174.

Act, a sentiment which was quite in vogue amongst “friends of the natives”. Rather than calling for the Acts repeal the document called for an amelioration of some of its provisions, while retaining the basic concept of segregation. The delegation endorsed the document, which was then forwarded to Harcourt as the basis for discussion at a meeting scheduled at the end of June. Harris’s conduct became even more curious when he asked the delegation to sign a document granting power of attorney to a firm of solicitors to act on behalf of Africans in Rhodesia in their land claims. Legal niceties like the delegation having no mandate or *locus standi* to sign such a document appeared to have eluded Harris! It is perhaps indicative of the delegates dependence on people like Harris and their organisations that they went along with these charades, despite their misgivings. The meeting with Harcourt, *sans* Harris, had a predictable outcome. Harcourt made it abundantly clear that he would not offend Louis Botha by either calling on him to rescind the law or to amend it in terms of suggestions put forward in the discussion document drawn up under the aegis of Harris. Britain could have intervened in terms of Colonial Laws Validity Act of 1865 which allowed for such an intervention if the laws were deemed to be repugnant to British principles.³¹ The delegation did not appear to be aware of this avenue of attack. Even had it been it seems as if Harcourt would either not have found the law repugnant, or was so intent on maintaining his relationship with Botha that he would not have invoked the law. Alternately Harcourt might have had his decisions influenced by a “romancer of the superlative degree”.³² This “romancer” might account for Harcourt informing the delegation that he had received the assurance from Botha that Africans had more than enough land.³³

Although Harris’s envisaged strategy of “abstention from public agitation pending the exhaustion of every constitutional means open to them” now lay in tatters, he still tried to play the spin-doctor. He sought to manage both the public platform and media image of the deputation. It is not clear whether it was Harris machinations or the presence of the delegates themselves but it appeared that the deputation was finding some resonance amongst the ‘left’ of the British media, politicians and

³⁰ B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, p. 173.

³¹ WM Tsotsi, *From Chattel to Wage Slavery...*, pp. 115-6.

³² ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 236-7.

³³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 247.

amongst religious organisations such as the “Brotherhood”. But whatever sympathy they were able to arouse they were unable to influence the Colonial Office vote that July. The intrigues surrounding Harris, the sustained rejection by the Colonial Office and personal problems were creating tensions within the SANNC delegation. Therefore it was not surprising that some members took the first opportunity to return home. However, before all could do so war broke out in Europe. Plaatje was reluctant to leave as he still had one last shot to fire in the battle for the recall of the Natives’ Land Act. In addition the remaining delegates had run out of funds for their return trip, and Dube who was already in South Africa, was not exactly being helpful. In the meantime Harris had organised funding for their return, but under such galling conditions that Plaatje unhesitatingly rejected the offer. When Msane, Rubusana and Mapikela returned home Plaatje was left to fight the battle on his own. And a battle it was.

Not only did Plaatje have to battle with his straitened circumstances, he also had to find funding for the publication of *Native Life...* and surmount the machinations of Harris who was doing his utmost to prevent publication of the book. At the same time he had not lost sight of his other main objective, namely to keep the protest against the Natives’ Land Act alive through public lectures and articles. In so doing he again put pressure on himself from sympathisers, who wanted to know when his book would be appearing. In between he was also involved in correspondence soliciting funds from South Africa for his *magnum opus*, albeit unsuccessfully, while also preparing other documents for publication in order to secure an income. Fortunately he was able to network with sympathisers in England with South African connections, such as the Colensos, who even if they were unable to give him much in terms of material support were at least able to give him moral support. His book finally emerged from the printing presses in May 1916.³⁴ After this digression one can return to the themes of loyalty and betrayal and how they were used by Plaatje to underscore his grievances against the Act and those who had drafted and enacted it.

At the time of finalising the manuscript for publication Plaatje war clouds were looming over Europe and finally unleashed their storm in August 1914. In terms of

the strategy that Plaatje was developing the hiatus between the original concept of the “little book” and final manuscript proved fortuitous. He was able to validate his theme of Boer betrayal of the British crown by referring to the Boer Rebellion of 1914. The shoddy treatment that the SANNC delegation received from the Colonial Office also provided a stark contrast with the treason of the 1914 rebellion. The outbreak of World War I provided a rich vein of sentiment for Plaatje to tap into, and resonate with the earlier jingoism invoked at the time of the South African War. The propagandists had beaten the jingoistic drum in order to whip up patriotic fervour against the Kaiser, to the point where any note of dissent against Britain was tantamount to treason. If conscientious objectors were stigmatised with a white feather what fate awaited those whose whole history was portrayed as one of betrayal of the British crown and values? Obviously the obverse side of the coin was what reward should those who had been so demonstrably loyal to the crown expect? Developments in South Africa had shown that it was the “traitors” who had benefited while the victims of their perfidy had suffered. Plaatje sought through his polemic to reverse this conundrum by appealing to the perceived innate English sense of decency and fair play. But this sense first of all had to be aroused, by starkly contrasting the loyalty of the Africans against the treachery of the Boers. Given that the most ready platform for Plaatje was to be found in Christian organisations, and that he himself was a committed believer, he also had to question the claimed Christianity of those who had framed the law, “a Government of professed Bible readers which, in defiance of all scriptural precepts, passes a law which penalises a section of the community along with their oxen, sheep, goats, horses and donkeys on account of the colour of their owners.”³⁵ Or were Blacks being made to pay for not supporting the Boers during the war?, as was suggested by a policeman Plaatje interviewed during his investigation of the impact of the Natives’ Land Act.³⁶

Events of the past were related to the present, to demonstrate that the present was consonant with the past, and not just an aberration. Instead the present was and is seen as confirmation of what had preceded. Equally important was to project the past

³⁴ This paragraph and the preceding two are based on B Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*, pp. 174-196.

³⁵ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 95-6.

³⁶ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 85-6.

and present into the future, based on a paradigm of the past. Through this projection a cataclysmic future was seen if no fundamental changes were initiated and Black demands for redress of their grievances were heeded.

The sense of grievance and betrayal that manifested itself over events culminating in the Natives' Land Act of 1913 intensified subsequently. There was no longer the feeling that the injustice of the past would recede unless there was intervention from a source that had the power to reverse the developments in South Africa. At the very least Africans felt that they could call upon "the many Liberals who fought steadily for the right of South Africa to govern herself to appeal to them to extend a similar consideration to the people of whose destinies they have become responsible."³⁷ Especially in the light of the fact that Grobler, a beneficiary of Gladstone's generosity, had chosen to rebel against the government at the first viable opportunity,³⁸ while African leaders had traversed the country to beseech their people not to exploit Britain's predicament.

Initially participation in World War I was argued to be consistent with the idea that, for instance in the case of the Basotho, they could not stand by while their king's, the British monarch's, house was ablaze.³⁹ This was an indication of the acceptance of British suzerainty. Implicit in this acceptance was that the monarchy also had an obligation to the people over which it held sway. At the same time those differences that existed between Black and White had to be held in abeyance until the war over. By easing the pressure on the British government over "reactionary and unpopular one-sided laws", a total commitment was given to achieving the aims of the war. With peace settled, Britain had to strive after the principles in the Union that she was believed to have fought to protect. In many respects the arguments surrounding Black participation in World War I paralleled those given in favour of support for Britain in the South African War. Britain's "love for the free institutions" had to be applied to allow Blacks "a voice in the affairs of the country" and provide protection for the "aboriginal national institutions".⁴⁰ In contrast to this profession of loyalty and

³⁷ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 257.

³⁸ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 391.

³⁹ SM Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ SANNC, "Petition to King George V, from the South African Native National Congress, December 16, 1918", p. 129.

expectations it was held that the Afrikaners hoped for a German victory and thus a negation of Black aspirations. Even more galling was that while blacks were being “chased from their country” Jewish refugees from the tyranny of the pogroms of Europe were being received with open arms in South Africa.⁴¹

A German success would allow for the extension of German colonial rule to the Union. German rule would be akin to the Boer rule in the previously independent Orange Free State. Thus the Afrikaner would be able to rule without the fear of intervention from a benevolent mother country.⁴² While Blacks had declared a moratorium on protests against laws such as the Natives’ Land Act, the government was selective in the suspension of its activities. It suspended the hearings of the Beaumont Commission, which was investigating land allocations for Blacks. The suspension of the Beaumont Commission was not matched by a halt in the application of the Natives’ Land Act itself and evictions continued apace.⁴³ One tribe that had been evicted *in toto* were offered the compromise of their chief being allowed to remain provided that his subjects rendered three months of tenant labour a year. To which Plaatje comments that “these people could live happily on some other farm did not the Government prohibit their happiness at the behest of a rebel who, at or about the time of this enthralling compromise, was conducting treasonable operations against the Government”.⁴⁴ [The "rebel" is once again Grobler who, as will become evident was a frequent target of Plaatje's attacks.] Yet again there is the implied question of how it was possible that such a rebellion could be rewarded by British acquiescence to repressive legislation, while the king’s loyal subjects were being subjected to all sorts of humiliation and deprivation by the monarch’s disloyal subjects.

The offer of unstinting service by Blacks was rejected. They were relegated to a non-combatant status and this “prohibition surely carries the conviction that the native complaint against the South African constitution is something more than a mere sentimental grievance.”⁴⁵ A similar convention had been observed, with less

⁴¹ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 123.

⁴² ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 306.

⁴³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 246.

⁴⁴ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 246.

⁴⁵ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 399.

conviction, in the South African War. Implicit in denying Blacks arms was that their grievances were such that they would be justified in taking up arms. The argument for deploying Blacks as non-combatants was that it was foolhardy to arm and train potential enemies. Britain had nullified the reasons for Black support. In accepting Black commitment to the war effort Britain had to accept reciprocation of Black expectations of support and the arguments that underlay them. Plaatje contends that the anomaly of Black taxpayers being denied the vote compared to tax-evading non-combatant and rebellious Whites had been avoided by relegating Blacks to non-combatant status.⁴⁶ In some instances Blacks felt so aggrieved about being denied “the dignity of bearing arms” that they refused to enter service.⁴⁷ However, the decision to enlist or not to enlist was not merely a matter of loyalty to the crown. Grundlingh accepts that a motive for pacifism was an act of protest. However, those who chose to “take the king’s shilling” were at times virtually press-ganged, or in search of adventure, or trying to stay one step ahead of the law or creditors.⁴⁸

Until the Great War, Blacks appeared to be fatalistic about and resigned to their lot. They had fought for and lost their heritage. Their destiny appeared to have run its irreversible course. Britains ultimate success in the South African War had adequately demonstrated the futility of armed resistance. The only alternative was to offer their lives for the ‘colonial protector’ in the belief that Britain would reciprocate by redressing previous injustices. The desperate cry of “*Abatwana bam, Abatwana bam*” (“Oh, my children, my children”) of one going down on the “Mendi” gave Blacks “reason to believe that his cry was a testimony of hope that the man had fought a good fight for a good cause and better things awaited their children.”⁴⁹

Despite these exhortations it was becoming increasingly clear that Britain would rather deal with those who had been responsible for the 1914 Rebellion and an abomination such as the Natives’ Land Act than those who had demonstrated their

⁴⁶ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 308.

⁴⁷ ZK Matthews, *Freedom for My People...*, p. 60.

⁴⁸ AM Grundlingh, *Fighting their Own War...*, pp. 167-91 and 57-59.

⁴⁹ CCM Ndamse, “The New Day”, in S Biko (ed.), *Black Viewpoint*, pp. 39-40; and AB Xuma, “An Address at the Mendi Memorial Celebration”, Karis and Carter, *Volume 2*, p. 163.

loyalty to the empire.⁵⁰ Britain would idly stand by while legislation was enacted by people whose “national traditions are to enslave the dark races”.⁵¹

The whole thrust of *Native Life...* is that the Natives’ Land Act was an abomination engendered by the ‘Boer mentality’. That is why he was anxious to trace Boer history and show it to be steeped in racial prejudice. At the same time he had to demonstrate that the British were the antithesis of the Boers and their values. This contrast was essential in persuading the British that to countenance legislation such as the Natives’ Land Act was to surrender benevolent colonial principles. It is against this background that he created his perceptions of the Land Act. After all the Boers had fled the Cape at the time of the Great Trek to evade the more “equitable laws of the Cape Colony” so that the emigrants could once again enslave Blacks without British interference.⁵²

Early writers see a variety of motives for the passage of the Natives’ Land Act. Plaatje appears to be bemused by the viewpoint of an Afrikaner policeman in the Orange Free State who stated that Blacks were getting their just desserts for not aiding Britain in the South African War. Said policeman did not answer Plaatje’s query as to why, if his view was correct, Blacks in the Cape and Natal should also suffer under the Act.⁵³ This report seems to presage the comment subsequently made by ZK Matthews, that Blacks had suffered at the hands of the Boers for their support of the British during the war.⁵⁴ Boer betrayal is further underlined by Plaatje when he comments that the vengeance being wreaked by the Boers was scant thanks for the support Africans had given the Boer families during the war while their commandos were fighting to ensure that the *status quo* for Blacks was maintained.⁵⁵ Plaatje’s views were probably influenced by what was interpreted as a deliberate British policy to rehabilitate the Boers on their farms. Some of these farms had been successfully taken over by Blacks during the war. To evict these squatters, Warwick says, ex-commandos were re-armed and allowed to use force to evict the new inhabitants of the farms. In the process the ownership of cattle became a source of much

⁵⁰ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 393.

⁵¹ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 76.

⁵² ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 127.

⁵³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 86-6.

⁵⁴ ZK Matthews, *Freedom for My People...*, p. 5.

acrimony.⁵⁶ This turn of events could hardly be seen as a fitting reward to those who had so clearly shown their loyalty to Britain.

The obligatory sale of crops forced the Black into selling his labour and reduced him to “serfdom” and a “veritable bondsman”.⁵⁷ The Act was also seen as a means to limit African bargaining power in two important areas. The first was that Black participation in land allocation decisions was denied. The second (which, significantly, is seen to arise from the first) was to limit the ability of Blacks to sell their labour on a market determined by the natural forces of supply and demand. The forced evictions from the farms, which were vital areas of domicile, were interpreted as a distortion of market forces.⁵⁸ While stopping short of genocide, the Act aimed to enslave Blacks and committed them to perpetual bondage in the agricultural sector or to a “sunless life in the unwholesome mines”.⁵⁹

Through limiting access to land, labour coercion was facilitated. Those tenant farmers who could no longer practise their livelihood on rented land and were unable to get land in the reserves had to enter into an annual three-month labour contract with the farmer on whose land they were domiciled.⁶⁰ Thus, from the earliest perceptions of the Act it is clear that the Act was widely interpreted as a measure of labour coercion. Nevertheless, early writers are of the opinion that in essence the law pandered to Afrikaner political concerns and racial prejudice, which feared that Cape liberalism would be enforced in the northern provinces.⁶¹

Plaatje is at his most scathing when he highlights what he perceived to be Boer double standards. He finds it incomprehensible that a parliamentarian, Grobler, who was a prime mover behind the Act, quoted the Bible to show that the Boers should not invade German South West Africa. Grobler refers to Deuteronomy 19:14, which he claimed was a divine injunction on the Boers not to move the beacons of others. “But

⁵⁵ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 147.

⁵⁶ P Warwick, *Black People and the South African War*, pp. 164-6.

⁵⁷ SM Molema, *The Bantu...*, p. 249; and DDT Jabavu, “Native Unrest...”, in DDT Jabavu, *The Black Problem...*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ SANNC, “Resolution against the Natives’ Land Act...”, in Karis and Carter (eds.), *Volume 1*, p. 87.

⁵⁹ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 159.

⁶⁰ SANNC, “Petition to King George V, from the South African Native National Congress, December 16, 1918”, p. 129.

strange to say, the religious scruples of these pious objectors never revolted against removing the landmarks of their native neighbours and appropriating, not only their land and labour, but even the persons of these neighbours.”⁶² In a similar vein the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) is warned that one day it would be called to account for its tacit endorsement of the Act.⁶³ The DRC through its own discriminatory practises might have created the impression amongst the Boers that the church sanctioned the Act.⁶⁴ In Plaatje’s view the Act was a heresy, that even penalised the livestock of Blacks, due to their owners pigmentation.⁶⁵ Plaatje consistently contrasts the themes of loyalty and disloyalty. He comments that it must have been a source of satisfaction to Grobler that, while he languished in jail for participating in the 1914 Rebellion, his loyal Black countrymen were being persecuted in terms of a law formulated by a government he had rebelled against.⁶⁶ A government that was constituted in keeping with a promise made by Kitchener prior to the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging that the vote “will be so limited as ensure the just prominence of the white race”.⁶⁷ Plaatje remained consistently sceptical about the Boers professed Christianity.⁶⁸ Despite this scepticism Plaatje was also aware of the dangers of claiming divine partisanship. God was the god of all combatants. Nevertheless, Britain and her allies could still claim the moral high ground because they had never raised a finger against the Republics, while the latter had been guilty of all sorts of depredations against the Blacks and their stock.⁶⁹

Despite Plaatje’s sustained efforts in word and deed it is clear the by the end of his manuscript there was a sense of futility and disillusionment which nevertheless still indicated that some residual trust in Britain and the British people remained. In the final paragraph of the penultimate chapter Plaatje makes a veiled threat when he says:-

⁶¹ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 25.

⁶² ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 390.

⁶³ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 151.

⁶⁴ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 148.

⁶⁵ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 95-6.

⁶⁶ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, pp. 393 and 433.

⁶⁷ ZR Mahabane, “The Colour Bar”, Presidential Address. Delivered by the Rev ZR Mahabane..., in GM Carter and SW Johns (eds.), *The Good Fight...*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁸ ST Plaatje, *Mhudi...*, pp. 82-3.

⁶⁹ JL Comaroff (ed.), *The Boer War Diary...*, pp. 33-5.

*The Imperial Government by the obligations of its overlordship and its plighted word to the natives, at the time of federation, is in duty bound to free the natives from the shackles of these laws, or otherwise, declare its guardianship of the interests of the natives to have ceased, and counsel these weaker races to apply elsewhere for relief.*⁷⁰

Even though subsequent developments were to confirm Plaatje's pessimism, and justify the threat contained in the last quotation, this in no way detracts from the value of his work as a record of a critical period in South African history. A period where the legacy is still being dealt with today, both on the political level and through the Land Claims Court. It is a moot point whether Plaatje's and the contributions of others' can be dismissed as mere polemics. Whatever position one chooses to take Plaatje's writings are of further significance. They are indicative of a desperate plea by African leaders of the time for the rule of reason and equity, which were consistently ignored. Ignored to the point where the early leadership's successors assessed the strategies of their predecessors and concluded that the powers that be could ignore them and that the only message that they would understand was that of violence. Ironically no sooner had this decision been taken in the 1960s than there was a reversion to an earlier strategy, namely that of looking for external intervention. Except that in the modern era the appeals were no longer directed at Britain, which thanks to the writings of early authors, had come to be perceived as, at the very least, a co-accused by reason of her tacit approval of the "legislative tendencies". Admittedly the motives for this complicity took on a different complexion from those adduced by Plaatje, but Britain was no longer considered to be a reliable ally. Instead modern South African resistance movements looked to the international community for support to achieve their objectives, while following the same strategies as those used by Plaatje.

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⁷⁰ ST Plaatje, *Native Life...*, p. 396.

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