

**“THE IMPERIAL SENTIMENT WHICH PREVAILS”: WRITING  
TO AND FROM NATAL: C. 1900-1910**

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The kind of ‘history’ taught in both British and Colonial schools at the time of the South African War was closely identified with the ‘island story’ of Britain, a geographical space expanded by J.R. Seeley’s Expansion of England published in 1881 and 1882. In this version of the British past, the ‘liberty’ and ‘democracy’ of the earlier Victorian period was replaced by the great English exodus, as ‘Greater Britain’, in Seeley’s infamous words, ‘conquered half the world in a fit of absence of mind’ (Field 1981:41). Seeley’s work suggested that empire did not possess a strictly independent existence but was, in a sense an ‘organic extension of the home-nation’ (Schwarz 1996:3). During the two decades between 1880 and 1900, the ‘imperialism’ of Seeley and his contemporary J.A. Froude<sup>1</sup> came to occupy a prominent place in the British national imagination, and this concept was expressed in the literature of the period (Boehmer 1995:31).

Natal had, as a region, not always received a positive press from British imperial historians. In 1880, J.A. Froude, one of the most prominent historians of the time, had described the acquisition of the colony as the ‘costliest and most worthless to us. If we had the courage to allow it to be independent, the Dutch would occupy it again, and save us further trouble’. For Froude, Natal was simply a place inherited from the Dutch where a great deal of money had been spent in ‘dealing with the Zulus’ (Froude, 1880:33-34). By the time of the South African War, Natal had become a crucial section of the imperial sphere consisting of ‘loyal Europeans and natives’ who played an important role against the Boer invasion (Doyle, 1901:62). The kinds of ideas that made up the ‘imperial’ consciousness are difficult to pinpoint though the official ‘version’ of the war is most evident in Robert Russell’s educational text, Natal: the Land and Its Story, originally published in 1891, but updated in 1903 (Russell, 1903). Russell, as superintendent of education in Natal had been influential in establishing the European school system in the region during 1880s and he produced this book as a combined geography and history at

the request of the Council of Education (Russell, 1903:v). Russell's expectation of Natalian imperial loyalty is clearly spelt out as he describes the 'imperial sentiment which prevails' in the region which has, historically, a strong provenance of English control (Russell, 1903:116-117). In describing the South African War, Russell refers disparagingly to Boer 'marauders' and the manner in which Boer 'guerilla warfare caused ceaseless trouble' (Russell 1903:316-317). In his opinion - and one should reiterate the point here that this text was used as an educational set book by Natal school-children - 'no nation has ever been so generous to a fallen foe as Great Britain has been to the Boers' (Russell 1903:319).

Russell's text-book contained the historiography of colonial Natal which provided the framework for the white history of the region during the 20th century. It is important to note here though, that while this colonial narrative was under construction, an alternative 'anthropology' of the region was also emerging. This followed a developing set of ideas on the 'Zulu' in Natal and, while white 'history' took its lead from Russell (which had been based on John Bird's Annals of Natal), black 'anthropology' utilised as formative texts, the collections of ex-officials, particularly individuals like J.Y. Gibson, who published The Story of the Zulus in 1903 and James Stuart, whose History of the Rebellion appeared in 1913. This ethnographical approach was also fed by the fiction of writers like Rider Haggard who added his own flavour of 'Zuluness' to this collection of literature. During the South African War, white officers had requested local 'native affairs' officials to provide them with displays of 'Zulu dancing' and it was this kind of anthropological depiction that emerged in defining the 'Zulu' past during the early years of the century. This ideology was further reinforced by the colonial mentality expressed through educational media such as the Natal Government Museum, a topic I discussed in some detail in an earlier paper on the South African War.<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic nature of 'Zuluness' in Natal was also, by the early 1900s, being explored on film in such productions as A Zulu's Heart (1908), Rastus in Zululand (1910); Zululand (1911); A Wild Ride (1913) and The Zulu King (1913). (Leech 1997:8).

Most recent analyses agree that the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 was a crucial turning-point for popular literature with imperial themes (Giddings, 1996:xvii-xviii). The hugely

influential visual interpretations of British military actions by painters like Lady Butler lent an added impact to colonial adventures.<sup>3</sup> One result of this popularisation during the last two decades of the 19th century, was the emergence in British culture of a clearly defined figure, that of the ‘soldier hero’, an individual who came to represent a particular kind of heroic masculinity (Dawson, 1991:113). He maintained this heroic status by his war exploits, adventures and danger, and through an imagining of imperial identity, in which the Englishman enjoyed a natural racial superiority over the colonized peoples’ (Dawson, 1991:119). This was expressed in literary accounts as a fusion of masculinity, nationalism and military patriotism in clearly discernible patterns of narrative structure (Dawson, 1994:24).

From the 1880s, the most widely circulated genre for the depiction of these images was the novels written for boys. Imperial adventures were mostly widely disseminated in this form through the work of G.A. Henty, of whom an early biographer noted that he ‘taught more lasting history to boys than all the schoolmasters of his generation’ (Reader, 1988:29). In his text on the Anglo-Zulu War, Henty made the position of white Natalians, whom he called The Young Colonists quite clear in their response to the presence of the Zulu: ‘the existence of such an army of warlike savages on the frontier is a standing threat to the very existence of the colony’ (Henty, 1885:50). However, the Boer is also kept in his place as a lower rank ‘he lives in the same primitive style as his poorest neighbour ... books are almost unknown in their houses, and they are ignorant and prejudiced to an extreme degree ... hardest and cruel of masters to the unfortunate natives whom he keeps in slavery under the title of indentured apprentices, and whose lives he regards as of no more importance than those of his sheep. To the unhappy natives the taking over of the Transvaal by England has been a blessing of the highest kind’ (Henty, 1885:156). Henty’s first novel on the South African War, With Buller in Natal was described as an instance of ‘boy heroism’ and had a specifically Natalian theme, revolving around the exploits of an informal company, the ‘Maritzburg Scouts’. For Henty, the siege of Ladysmith was an episode during the war which demonstrated Boer cowardice in not having ‘the heart to venture even once to face the British in the open’ (Henty, 1901:vi). The second in Henty’s series of South African War novels, With Roberts to Pretoria contains similar anti-Boer statements. When Yorke, the hero of the narrative

takes on a Boer disguise, he is required to be long-haired, sunburnt and with a face 'a little more dirty' (Henty, 1902:89). Arthur Conan Doyle also stressed the inferior nature of the rural Boers as 'formidable in their primitive qualities ... sunburned' and 'tangle-haired' (Doyle, 1901:82). Though these texts focus on specifically 'English' or 'British' qualities specific constructions of ethnic identity are provided in Everett-Green's 1910 narrative A Gordon Highlander in which the hero's Scots courage is emphasised though clearly within the confines of a regiment 'under the Union Jack' (Everett-Green, 1910:172-180).

Despite these racist depictions of the Boers, authors writing on the conflict made it quite clear that this was a 'white man's war'. Doyle pointed out that despite the large number of volunteers from non-white groups within the empire, 'this was to be a white man's war, and if the British could not work out their own salvation, then it were well that empire should pass from such a race' (Doyle, 1901:73). Black people in Natal, specifically 'Zulus' were emphatically denied the right to assist the British in this struggle and remained in a subordinate role as 'loyal servants' (Finnemore, 1928:20-22, 25). The importance of the British presence amongst the indigenous population in Natal was as their protectors against Boer ill-treatment (Doyle, 1901:7; Finnemore, 1928:5-6). Finnemore describes Roberts' triumphal entry into Pretoria as being attended by 'blacks of every shade, of every tribe, all... rejoicing in the victory of the English' (Finnemore, 1928:246). At the same time, blacks, particularly 'Zulus' were accorded certain ethnically defined traits which set them apart as unique from other indigenous people. In F.S. Brereton's text, One of the Fighting Scouts, an old Zulu, Intungo is depicted as 'full of wisdom and knowledge of the things of the world' and in fact is able to provide information on Boer movements (Brereton, 1903:134-135).

Imperial sentiment has been viewed as having particularly strong links to the English Public Schools (Rich 1991:115-116). The South African War generated specific literary instances of this ethos which included imperial adventures as part of a process whereby the products of this educational system became 'gentlemen'. (Jaffe 1995:93). As Robert Morrell has also demonstrated, the Natal region had also provided, by the end of the 19th century, a set of resonances of the public school ideology of masculinity (Morrell 1996). The 'literature of school' has also been identified as an extremely influential genre during

the decades following the publication of Thomas Hughes 1857 novel, Tom Brown's Schooldays (Quigley, 1982:152-154). Albert Baker, writing in Natal shortly before the South African War, made his mission quite clear in this context. He intended to 'write a volume worthy of ranking with Tom Brown's Schooldays,' by which task 'I shall have done my generation a service which will in itself be a sufficient reward' (Baker 1897:6). Moving between the 'High School' (later Maritzburg College), the German school at Hermansburg and the infant Hilton College of the 1870s - concluding chapter on 'divine love', thus muscular Christianity precluding 'the certainty and glory of the Christ-life' (Baker, 1897:167). Baker's narrative thus described school-boy life during the colonial identity making process of the 1860s and 1870s. John Finnemore's Two Boys in Wartime first published in 1902 had a Natal theme in which boys of school age were given specific roles in the South African conflict. In this text, Dan and Jack March, who lived on a farm in Natal become embroiled in hostilities and have to use their resourcefulness in spying on the Boers while at the same time having to leave their home to the mercy of Boer raiders (Finnemore, 1928:64-65). Henty's With Roberts to Pretoria had also used a theme common in school-boy literature, that of the 'fair fight' where a Boer boy was 'fairly beaten' and 'richly deserved the punishment he got' (Henty, 1902:52). Another use of the public school motif is Haskins' 1900 text For the Queen in South Africa in which the opening chapter is couched almost entirely in the rhetoric of a rugby match as the hero 'plays the game' against the Boers in Natal (Haskins, 1900:41-42).

Brereton, like Henty viewed British boys as superior to both their Boer and Zulu contemporaries and had given his boy heroes important roles during the Zulu War of 1879 (Brereton 1887:11). In his South African War text, Brereton pre-empted Baden-Powell's 1907 Scouting for Boys which, as MacDonald has noted, was a result of the way in which the conflict 'forced the public to imagine once more the meaning of the imperial frontier' (MacDonald 1993:77). Brereton focused on the ingenuity demonstrated by an English and an Irish boy in outwitting Boer scouts and in obtaining information on Louis Botha's plans for an invasion of Natal (Brereton 1903:88-89; 155-157). Baden-Powell's text, which provided a framework for the enormously popular Boy Scouts' Movement contained strong associations between the 'Zulus' and scouting, a point also stressed by

Brereton's descriptions of the old Zulu, Intungo.<sup>1</sup> These ideas were also reflected in Henty's work where the blacks 'needed no instruction in the art of scouting, it was born in their blood' (Henty, 1902:102).

The Scout Movement was instrumental in re-inventing the imperial frontier for both boys and girls across the English class structure, thus moving this ideology beyond the limited context of public school-boys. Walvin has also noted that imperial identity had been part of the national consciousness from the 1880s when 'the great mass of the nation's young, (were) now caught in the web of compulsory education' (Walvin, 1987:248). Sally Mitchell has recently noted that girls' education and literature was undergoing particularly radical changes during the period from the 1880s until the First World War (Mitchell 1995). The South African War arena had opened up professional fields for young women, though nursing, for instance, remained a largely middle-class occupation with the result that much of the historiography on this issue has an 'imperial' flavour. Most of the historical texts on the role of women in the conflict have also been specifically English in nature.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell has identified L.T. Meade's A Sister of the Red Cross as an important text on the position of the 'new girl' in the South African War context. This novel is a curious blend of romantic concern and professional conduct with the expected high standards of professional nursing behaviour being continually juxtaposed with issues of romance, fashion and socialising during the siege of Ladysmith (Meade, 1900:12). It is difficult to judge Meade's influence on young girl readers but Foster and Simons have recently pointed out that she was extremely widely read, being voted most popular author of 1898 in a poll organised by Girls' Realm (Foster & Simons, 1995:197).

As the examples discussed in this paper illustrate, most of the popular literature on Natal was written from the imperial metropolitan centre. Nevertheless, the social history suggests that Natalians had a strong sense of political and cultural identity as Natalians by 1902. As Russell's text indicates, there was a close association with imperial concerns and these sentiments continued to dominate the region into the union period as illustrated in texts such as Tatlow's 1911 publication. Tatlow emphasised Natalian identity as a

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<sup>1</sup>ibid., pp. 134-5.

'province' but the history section of the narrative is largely reiterative of Russell's (Tatlow, 1911:2-24). Paul Thompson has suggested that there was a 'British' civic culture in Natal, at least until the 1930s (Thompson, 1995), and imperial loyalty was demonstrated by Natalians' participation in imperial 'events' such as the 1910 coronation and the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. The historiography of the region also followed a path which stressed English, British and imperial connections, a trend which never really faded - as is evidenced by the popularity of 'settler' history from Natal as late as the 1970s. Finding a single date for the termination of a clearly-defined 'empire writing' is, as Elleke Boehmer has noted, a difficult project (Boehmer, 1998:xv). In the Natal region, though provincial identity evolved gradually in the years from 1910, literature both from the old imperial metropolis and from Natal itself continued to retain strands of the 'imperial sentiment which prevailed' in the years around 1900.

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1. Froude's imperial text *Oceana* was published in 1886.
  2. I have explored these ideas in a previous paper. See J. Pridmore, "'The Military Wanted to see a Zulu Dance': White History and Black Anthropology in the Natal Narrative, c. 1890-1905", paper presented at the Conference on Rethinking the South African War, University of South Africa, August 1998.
  3. For detailed analyses of Victorian military visual imagery see Usherwood and Spencer-Smith (1987) and Hichberger (1988). Jeff Guy has recently noted the widespread influence of depictions of the Anglo-Zulu War as an imperial adventure. See Guy 1998:163.
  4. For recent work on nursing and gender issues during the conflict see S. Marks, 'Imperial Nursing and the South African War' and H. Bradford, 'Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner Nationalism, Gender and Colonial Warfare in the South African War', papers presented at the Conference on Rethinking the South African War, Unisa, August 1998.