

Victorian Literature and Culture (2003), 429–446. Printed in the United States of America.
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THE BOERS AND THE ANGLO-BOER WAR (1899–1902) IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY MORAL IMAGINARY

By M. van Wyk Smith

IN 1891 LORD RANDOLPH CHURCHILL, father of the more famous Winston, visited South Africa and the soon-to-be Rhodesia on a trip that was intended to combine big-game hunting with the even more exciting prospects of entering the gold mining business. During the eight months of the visit, Churchill contributed a series of letters to the *Daily Graphic* on his thoughts and experiences, in one of which he had this to say about the Boers:

The Boer farmer personifies useless idleness. Occupying a farm of from six thousand to ten thousand acres, he contents himself with raising a herd of a few hundred head of cattle, which are left almost entirely to the care of the natives whom he employs. It may be asserted, generally with truth, that he never plants a tree, never digs a well, never makes a road, never grows a blade of corn . . . He passes his day doing absolutely nothing beyond smoking and drinking coffee. He is perfectly uneducated. With the exception of the Bible, every word of which in its most literal interpretation he believes with fanatical credulity, he never opens a book, he never even reads a newspaper. His simple ignorance is unfathomable, and this in stolid composure he shares with his wife, his sons, his daughters, being proud that his children should grow up as ignorant, as uncultivated, as hopelessly unprogressive as himself. In the winter time he moves with his herd of cattle into the better pastures and milder climate of the low country veldt, and lives as idly and uselessly in his waggon as he does in his farmhouse. The summer sees him returning home, and so on [sic], year after year, generation after generation, the Boer farmer drags out the most ignoble existence ever experienced by a race with any pretensions to civilization. (94–95)

The piece caused an outcry, and when a year later Churchill republished the letters as *Men, Mines and Animals in South Africa* (1892), he attempted to exonerate himself by claiming that these views were intended “to be exclusively confined to . . . the Dutch population of the Transvaal,” not “generally to the Dutch in South Africa” and went on: “The Dutch settlers in Cape Colony are as worthy of praise as their relatives, the Transvaal Boers, are of blame. The former, loyal, thrifty, industrious, hospitable, liberal are and will, I trust, remain the back-bone of our great colony at the Cape of Good Hope” (v–vi).

While this excessively dichotomised view of the Boers bears every mark of a hurried attempt to placate the Cape’s Afrikaner Bond and protect Cecil Rhodes’s power base,

Churchill's views also served to confirm and further popularise (his book was much read and ran into several editions before 1899) sharply contradictory images of the Boers that had a long and complex history. Offered as an absolute distinction between cultured Afrikaners of the Western Cape and demonized Boers of the far interior, Churchill's verdict elided some 200 years of Boer/Afrikaner racial-cultural assimilation and identity formation. Even so, I believe that Churchill's opinions cannot be merely dismissed but may serve as an indication that, in the decades before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, a crisis about Boer identity may have come to exist. Churchill's depiction of the Boers was, for instance, startlingly divergent from that of James Anthony Froude, who visited South Africa a mere four years earlier and whose radically different reading of them cannot have resulted simply from a different political agenda:

The Boers of South Africa, of all human beings now on this planet, correspond nearest to Horace's description of the Roman peasant soldiers who defeated Pyrrhus and Hannibal. There alone will you find obedience to parents as strict as among the ancient Sabines; the *severa mater* whose sons fetch and carry at her bidding, who, when those sons go to fight for their country, will hand their rifles to them and bid them return with their arms in their hands – or else not return at all. (42)

That at the time of the war there existed a widespread uncertainty about Boer cultural identity, an uncertainty, moreover, which could easily modulate into suspicions about Boer racial integrity, is evidenced in the fiction of the always shrewd and topically alert Rudyard Kipling, whose three major Boer War stories (“The Captive,” “A Sahib’s War,” and “The Comprehension of Private Copper”) all turn on Boer racial ambiguity – indeed, “A Sahib’s War” presents Boers as not just ethically but ethnically degenerate (Van Wyk Smith, “Telling the Boer War”).

I wish in this paper to trace the origins and implications of these remarkably dichotomous presentations of the Boers, and I shall do so by looking at the formation of Boer identity in the liminal and hybrid space of the Eastern Cape frontier several generations before the Anglo-Boer War. I shall contend that the Eastern Cape frontier was – at least until its relative closing from the time of the Sixth Frontier War of 1834–35 onwards – a space of much more extensive transculturation, transgression, and liminal identity than we may have allowed for. I want to suggest that developments after the 1830s terminated and later obscured earlier conditions of cultural and racial hybridity within which *trekboer* identity had taken shape. I shall propose that acquaintance with the strong sense of identity and self-determination of the British Settlers from 1820 onwards, the simultaneous formal militarization of the frontier by the colonial government, and the inevitable contingencies of the mass migration known as the Great Trek (1836–38), impelled the Boers hailing from the East Cape frontier into the need to resolve a crisis of identity and to embark on an agenda of aggressive self-determination such as had existed only intermittently and casually before the 1830s. The crux of my argument will be that ambivalent notions about Boer cultural and racial identity – put very bluntly at the time of the war as a question of whether the Boers were “another white race or not” – ensured not only that the war had much more of a racial edge to it than we may now care to remember, but also that Boer (later Afrikaner) preoccupation with racial exclusivity and self-determination would become the inevitable impetus behind the re-establishment of Afrikaner hegemony after the war. The war became for the Boers the last frontier war, but this time it was about the frontiers of identity, not territory.

In addition, I hope to show that the massive pro-Boer movement which developed in much of the Western world at the time of the war found precisely in this question of Boer identity its initial rallying point, and that this ethnic dimension of the war thus provided much of the ethical impulse behind the many discrete but ultimately interrelated discourses of humanitarian outrage, pacifism, socialism, and anti-imperialism which between 1899 and 1902 acquired a new international urgency and currency. Two of the twentieth century's most dominant anxieties, namely the problematics of race and the dilemmas of what Michael Ignatieff calls "moral universalism" (8), may thus be shown to have found foundational expression in the polemics surrounding the Anglo-Boer War. Afrikaner political ascendancy after the war, based on racial self-determination, ensured that South Africa would become the very paradigm of a racialized society in the twentieth-century world, while at the same time the discourse of moral universalism, finding its first persistent voice in that same war, would come to dominate Western liberal thinking about war, imperialism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, international terrorism, and much else in our own time. Put differently, my contention is that the major legacy of the Anglo-Boer War is to be sought not in the narrow diplomatic, political, and economic outcomes of the conflict (which were fairly minimal, as Andrew Porter has argued), but in the war's iconic status in the formation of at least two of our century's most pervasive ideological preoccupations. That the discourse of race and the discourse of international moral responsibility have so often been in sharp conflict does not invalidate but rather strengthens my argument, since the poignant contradiction between the Boers' inhumane treatment of Blacks and their purchase on international humanitarianism is precisely what was noticed at the time and further problematized the debate. As Sandi Cooper has shown, in Britain "a vigorous anti-war campaign . . . by peace, anti-imperialist, and pro-native societies" continued throughout the war, even though, "ironically, these were the same people who had been agitating against Boer behaviour toward native peoples in South Africa and [had been] attacking Kruger and his followers for their vicious exploitation of African natives" (177). It is not difficult to see that this contradiction vitiated the world's moral response to white – and more especially Afrikaner – South Africa throughout the twentieth century, the impulse to condemn being constantly compromised by the appeal to identity.

HOW, THEN, DID THIS DISCOMFORTING QUESTION of Boer identity, so seminal to the issues and nature of the South African War, and hence so foundational to major pre-occupations of our century, come about? Just who were the Boers? One answer is to suggest that the Boers, more specifically the *trekboers*, on the eve of their mass migration into the interior in the mid-1830s (and perhaps well *after* that date) were – or were at least perceived to be – a much more culturally and racially fluid and heterogeneous population than we have conventionally admitted. They were not just the makers, but also the products of the East Cape frontier, along with several other groups equally ill-defined racially and culturally. The possibility exists, then, that the move inland resulted, for various reasons, not in the extension and further diversification of this heterogeneity as might under different circumstances have happened, but rather in an increased anxiety about, and a consequent concern to defend, a fragile identity seen to be under threat. This "crisis of identity" would be constantly aggravated by – yet also repeatedly renew – the state of almost permanent warfare with other indigenous peoples which mark Boer history between 1836 and 1899, culminating in a war with the major imperial power of the region, Great Britain.

Anyone acquainted with the early discourse of the Cape will recognize that the diametrically opposed characters of the Boer sketched by Churchill and Froude have a long antecedence. Indeed, Lord Randolph's portrait is no more than a coarse fill-in of John Barrow's caricature of almost a century earlier:

Unwilling to work, and unable to think, with a mind disengaged from every sort of care and reflection, indulging to excess the gratification of every sensual appetite, the African peasant grows to an unwieldy size, and is carried off the stage by the first inflammatory disease that attacks him . . . [They] have no mental resources whatever . . . The history of a day is that of their whole lives . . . The peasantry of the Cape are better fed, more indolent, more ignorant, and more brutal than any set of men, bearing the reputation of being civilized, upon the face of the whole earth. (1: 77–80; 2: 79)

Yet Froude's encomium on Boers as republican Romans has an equally long ancestry, captured by, for instance, Bernardin de St Pierre on a visit to the Cape in the 1770s, when he presented the Berg family as classical patricians:

This counsellor's delight was to sit down, on his return from business, in the midst of his children; they threw their arms around his neck, the smallest embraced his knees; they made him the judge of their quarrels, and of their pleasures, while the eldest daughter, excusing some, approving of others, smiling on them all, redoubled the joy of this paternal heart. Methought I saw the Antiope of Idomeneus. (168)

It is possible to explain this divergence by attaching Bernardin de St Pierre's description to the patrician landowners of the south-western Cape and Barrow's to the *trekboers* of the frontier districts, and such a dichotomy did indeed exist, but it does not do away with the intimation here that over the next century some considerable confusion as to who the Boers actually were might arise. Churchill's invocation of a radical distinction between Transvaal Boers and the loyal Dutch of the Cape Colony relies on a popular discrimination with roots deep in the eighteenth century, even as it also exposes the facile inadequacy of such a distinction. Froude's republican Roman Boers were certainly not just the inhabitants of the western Cape. When, twenty-odd years after Barrow, Thomas Pringle described his settler party's escort in Froudean terms – “The Dutch-African boers, most of them men of almost gigantic size, sat apart . . . in aristocratic exclusiveness, smoking their huge pipes with self-satisfied complacency” (90) – he was talking about men of the frontier. Another settler, Thomas Philipps, meeting a *trekboer* near the Fish River, attests to the difficulty observers sometimes had with placing such figures. Finding the man at first “by no means prepossessing . . . rude and uncultivated,” he ends up seeing him as “a fine manly figure, with a bright black eye darting fire and animation, a noble forehead, a black bushy beard; and, altogether, there was so much character in the mind and figure, that I could have fancied him another Brutus” (210–11).

It seems, then, that what was really at issue in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century depictions of the Boers was not whether they were idealized Romans or indolent barbarians, but the extent to which they had become or were becoming a people who could no longer be described as European but were also not quite African. Barrow's persistent reference to them as “African peasants” unwittingly conferred on them a level of indigeneity

that then as well as afterwards could never be matched by any other settler group. It was also inevitable that this question of Boer identity would sooner or later be articulated as an issue of racial integrity, and so it was. Barrow himself claimed to have found many Boers living “entirely in the society of Hottentots” (1: 383), but much earlier Jan Splinter Stavorinus, who visited the Cape in the 1760s and 70s, concluded that “the farthest settlers, who reside thirty or forty days’ journey from Cape Town, more resemble Hottentots than the posterity of Europeans” (3: 444). Such views were repeated regularly, until John Dunbar Moodie, writing on the eve of the Great Trek, would describe the Boers as “even less refined than the Hottentots” (rev. of Pringle and Moodie 89).

HOW MUCH FOUNDATION WAS THERE for such claims? Some ten years ago several of the contributors to Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee’s seminal collection, *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, approached this issue, but with considerable caution – see particularly the essays by Elphick and Shell, Guelke, and Legassick – and mostly shared the editors’ view that liberal interpretations of the “‘openness’ of early South African Society” had been overplayed and that “miscegenation was largely irrelevant to stratification in South African society” (538). Nevertheless, all seemed to agree that “in trekboer areas, especially in the Northwestern Cape, there was considerable miscegenation” (540), and all the contributors, notably Legassick, bore witness to the substantial groups of racially and culturally mixed peoples developing on and beyond the Cape Colony’s frontiers. Valuable, however, as these essays are, it would now seem that the foregrounded concern with the then-sensitive issue of whether and how much black-white miscegenation had actually taken place obscured the more interesting and relevant question for our purpose. In order to demonstrate the heterogeneous character of early frontier communities it is not necessary to prove miscegenation. Evidence of what I would call transcultural sociality – communal or at least proximate existence – will do, and of this there is plenty.

In both Burgher Petitions of 1779 and 1784 the frontier farmers complained that “younger men, who have no means of establishing themselves, must remain unmarried or live among the Hottentots,” or, again, “many young colonists . . . have to settle here or there in a miserable hut among the Hottentots” (qtd. in Du Toit and Giliomee 40, 43). Naturally the petitioners put on this situation the grimmest interpretation, but Leonard Guelke has shown that such arrangements not only could work to the mutual advantage of both the Boers and their Khoikhoi hosts, but were so frequent that “two distinct frontier communities emerged: one . . . the ‘orthodox’ trekboer community, dedicated to the maintenance of an exclusivist ‘European’ way of life; the other or ‘pluralist’ community involved the blending of cultures and peoples within an informal social framework” (93). Just how many Boers may have found a home in these “pluralist” communities is suggested by Hermann Giliomee’s analysis of the 1798 Graaff-Reinet *opgaaf*, according to which only 26% of 972 adult male burghers held land (455). The rest tended to be nomadic *bywoners*, and by 1810 Stockenstrom reported from Graaff-Reinet that between 800 and 900 landless colonists were moving about the district in this way (Giliomee 456), attaching themselves to whomever would provide. Conversely, Elphick and Malherbe remind us that the Khoi who lived in these symbiotic relationships with the colonists often came to call themselves Boers (24).

But what makes all this evidence really intriguing is the indication that contemporaries were less worried about the issues of miscegenation and transculturation *per se* than about the growth on and beyond the colony’s borders of an ever increasing population of mixed but

Africanized peoples hostile to the European colony. The Burgher Petitions complained that “this miscegenation could produce a new generation which might prove even more formidable than the Bushmen at present”; they expressed the fear that such “a completely degenerate nation” might turn out to be “as dangerous for the colony as the Bushman-Hottentots now are” (qtd. in Du Toit and Giliomee 40, 43). Further evidence of such paradoxical attitudes to frontier identity, where substantial laxity about racial and cultural parameters are off-set against substantial anxiety on the part of others within the same broad community, can be found throughout the period from the 1770s to the 1830s. These were the decades during which the East Cape frontier opened up to allow a brief window of transracial and transcultural opportunity before it closed down again with the militarization of the frontier and the departure of the Boers. A few instances of such ambivalent hybridization must suffice. Furthermore, a *perception* of frontier racial and cultural liminality may have been just as important for subsequent debates about Boer identity as any hard evidence. So, for instance, a 1790 review of Le Vaillant’s extremely popular *Travels* embroidered on his presentation of the East Cape Boers in order to confirm a pervasive impression:

These eastern settlers are a bold but cruel race: they are of a mixed breed, in general the sons of Hottentot women by European fathers, robust, active, strong, patient, and fearless. . . . These colonists remind us of the backwoodsmen of America, a wild savage race, who only learn from the little civilization that distinguishes them to be more ferocious and malignant than man is in a state of nature. (40)

Shipwreck narratives, from the sixteenth to the late-eighteenth century, provide many instances of social and racial hybridity that must have become paradigmatic of possible relations on the frontier. Typical examples may be found in Jacob van Reenen’s account of looking for survivors of the *Grosvenor* wreck of 1782. He tells of meeting many people “who were descended from people shipwrecked on that coast,” among whom were “three old women . . . who said they were sisters, and had, when children, been shipwrecked on this coast, but could not say of what nation they were” (160). Invited to return to the Cape with the search party, the women said they first wished “to gather in their crops . . . after which, with their whole race, to the amount of four hundred, they would be happy to depart from their present settlement” (171). From the sixteenth to the late-eighteenth century several such communities evolved along the south-east coast of South Africa, with little if any affiliation to the more formal dynamics of the colony (Van Wyk Smith, “Lobo” and “Frontier Transculturation”).

Just a few years later, on the first British invasion of the Cape in 1795, Commander Abraham Sluysken found many of the frontier *trekboers* so out of sympathy with the Dutch colonial government and so little identified with their western Cape compatriots that he considered it safer to rely on Hottentot *pandoeren* than these Boer commandos from the interior for the defence of the Cape. The British, therefore, took over the Cape at a moment when many of the frontier Boers were in revolt, and what strikes one now is that almost immediately there was set in motion that polemic about who the Boers actually were (and how they were to be distinguished from other frontier groups) that we now associate with Barrow and was to last throughout the century. For even as such commentators as the Le Vaillant reviewer were casting the Boers as “a mixed breed,” and others, including the burgher petitioners, described poorer Boers living with Khoikhoi, yet others, like Robert

Percival, at the Cape during the first British occupation, would perceive only the savage racism of the Boers, evidently aimed precisely at distinguishing themselves from their frontier neighbors:

Perhaps the chief cause of the great depravity of mind found among the distant boers of the colony, is to be ascribed to the cruelty and contempt with which they are accustomed from their infancy to treat the Hottentots . . . [For] the first lesson they are taught is their superiority over the unfortunate African. (222, 205)

These apparent contradictions may be explained partly as the result of imperfect information and observation, but partly also as the manifestation of forms of racial dynamics far more fluid, provisional, and opportunistic than the South Africa of a later date was to witness. Hermann Giliomee has explored the culture of shifting alliances, contention, and co-operation which existed on the East Cape frontier throughout the period under review, whether between Boer and Khoi, Boer and Xhosa, or Xhosa and Khoi, and concludes: “In the fragmented political structure of the frontier it was common for various ethnic communities, or rather groups within these communities, to form alliances to obtain specific ends” (429). Martin Legassick, again, has traced the complex manoeuvrings between Boers and Griquas, and indeed among several hybrid groupings on and beyond the frontier including also the “Basters” and “Bergenaars,” with all of whom frontier Boers were in contact. Indeed, Legassick’s careful description of the emergence of Griqua autonomy in the Transorangia area between 1800 and 1814 provides more than enough evidence that what he calls the Griqua “quasi-feudal oligarchy” (400) formed the model for the early Voortrekker (i.e., Boer) states to be established a few decades later (405). In this regard one might also cite Jeff Peires’s suggestion that the ideal relationship envisioned by the Voortrekkers seems to have been that proposed by Hendrik Potgieter to the Griqua leader, Adam Kok: “We are emigrants together with you . . . who together with you dwell in the same strange land and we desire to be regarded as neither more nor less than your fellow-emigrants, inhabitants of the country, enjoying the same privileges with you” (508). Solomon T. Plaatje’s account in *Mhudi* of early synergies between Tswana and trekkers, drawn from Tswana oral record, seems to support a similar interpretation. B. F. von Bouchenroeder, a former employee of the Dutch East India Company who travelled through the colony shortly after its restoration to the Dutch, supported Barrow’s high regard for the Xhosa and thought the colony’s future lay in the assimilation of Boer and Xhosa interests. He regarded the experience of the Graaff-Reinet farmer Coenraad Buys, who was welcomed by Ngqika and offered “eene der schoonste en ruimste landstreken in het Kafferland” (one of the most beautiful and spacious regions in Kaffir Land) in which to settle and instruct Ngqika’s people in agricultural methods, as prototypical of the sort of symbiosis necessary for the peaceful future of the frontier (61). The Buys story was to become notorious in the mythology of racism of South Africa, but here is contemporary evidence that it was seen as an attractive option at the time. Nor was it an isolated case. Jeff Peires has reminded us of perhaps the most spectacular example of such transcultural sociality in the case of the early Voortrekker, Louis Tregardt, who at first, with his party of 30 families, trekked no further than the upper reaches of the Wit Kei, where he received 12000 morgen from the Xhosa paramount chief Hintsa and where the whole party might well have settled permanently as the subjects of a Xhosa king, had it not been for the outbreak of the Sixth Frontier War (506–08).

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BRITISH SETTLERS IN 1820 impacted on the complex symbiotics of the East Cape frontier in many and dramatic ways. In the first place, the British settlers came with the intention of remaining resolutely European and, as we have already seen in the case of Thomas Pringle, regarded the Boers with some bemusement as an alien and indigenous people. This alone must have initiated in the Boers a self-consciousness about their identity which they had not explicitly considered before. Add to this the rapid militarization of the frontier after 1820, culminating in the massive overkill of the 1834–35 Frontier War when Governor D'Urban and Col. Harry Smith attempted to break the power of the whole Xhosa nation, as well as the speed with which Settler spokespersons such as Robert Godlonton, William Shaw, and John Centlivres Chase developed their own version of an Anglo-Saxon imperial mission, and one can readily see that between 1820 and the early 1830s Boer ambivalences about identity and affiliation could only have intensified.

While individual Boer and British frontier farmers obviously got on well and developed yet another set of transcultural socialities, it is also true, as Peires has pointed out, that “the idea of a Xhosa-Afrikaner alliance against the British is a constant theme in early Afrikaner history, appearing in both the Graaff-Reinet rebellion of 1799 and the Slangers Nek revolt of 1815” (508). This is the stuff of romance, in more senses than one, but in the realm of cultural symbolism, perception is often more powerful than actuality; hence, one cannot dismiss as merely fanciful the recurrence of the twin-motifs of Boer racial ambiguity and frontier loyalty in a number of novels set in the Eastern Cape which began to appear from the early 1830s. Novels such as *Makanna; or, The Land of the Savage* (1834), Edward Kendall's *The English Boy at the Cape* (1835), Thomas Forester's *Everard Tunstall: A Tale of the Kaffir Wars* (1851), or Harriet Ward's *Jasper Lyle: A Tale of Kafirland* (1851) focus almost uniformly on two contrasting but also complementary images of the Boer, either as Stoic, heroic patriarch presiding over his indigenous frontier feudal domain, or as swarthy, shadowy interloper, uncouth and scheming, as uncertain of race as of loyalty (see Van Wyk Smith “Romancing the East Cape Frontier,” “Textual Ripples,” and “Frontier Transculturation”). Caricatures as such representations may be, they made a powerful contribution to the developing iconology of the frontier Boer.

That many liminal frontier figures existed during these years, providing inspiration for the writers of popular fiction, there can be no question. There were deserters, outlaws, nomadic Boers living among the Khoi, runaway slaves, and others who either joined larger frontier groupings, such as the Griquas, Basters, or Bergenaars, or sometimes made up roving bands of raiders and traders such as that formed by Hendrik Afrikaner before his conversion by John Campbell (Philip 2: 215–25) or constituted the “skelmbasterkraals” of outright outlaws (Giliomee 458). Many individual intermediary figures could be encountered anywhere on frontier farms, some famous, some less so. About the half-Boer, half-Khoi charismatic figure of Afrikaner, Robert Moffat remarked: “[He] is the bond of peace between all the tribes in this part of the world [i.e., around Kuruman], and, should he leave it, the whole country will be filled with robbery and murder” (Philip 2: 226). In contrast to the eventually benign figure of Afrikaner, one can cite John (or Jan) Bloom, who, according to John Campbell's account of 1814, had a European father but became “an African robber.” He “prevailed on many Hottentots to accompany him on his plundering expeditions . . . took several wives from among the Corannas . . . [and] received much assistance from Jacob and Kaanel Krieger, two boors who had fled from the colony . . . and shared in the plunder which he obtained” (Campbell 361). Bloom was just one of many who ran such indeterminate outlaw groups

that terrorized the frontier. The son of the same Jacob Krieger or Kruger mentioned here, Abraham Kruger, became a leader of the Bergenaars, who held out in the southern Free State and, according to several contemporary commentators, among them Thomas Pringle (*Narrative*, ch. 12), made slave raids part of their business. Yet when Dr. John Philip met them in 1825, expecting to meet “a horde of naked savages,” he found instead “a number of smart young men, dressed quite in the style of the most respectable farmers of the colony” (2: 334).

Of other less spectacular but therefore perhaps more ubiquitous liminal figures one catches glimpses throughout the frontier record. So, for instance, in 1816, on his way back to Cape Town after having visited the Eastern Cape to decide on the location for a new Moravian mission station, the Reverend Christian Latrobe, overnighting on a farm near Avontuur in what is today known as the Langkloof, met “a dark-coloured man, who travels about as a schoolmaster, to teach the farmers’ children their letters and a little cyphering, spending a few weeks at a time at one place, then going on to another, . . . there being no schools in the country.” We have no name for this man, and no other information, but Latrobe adds a fascinating afterthought: “The schoolmaster was a very inquisitive man, and a shrewd politician” (252). Latrobe’s “dark-coloured man,” half-educated but living by his wits, keeping politically alert and keeping on the move, is surely a paradigmatic figure of the frontier, representing a whole class of people, often of indeterminate race and inscrutable affiliation, who must have moved through the frontier for decades before the social and racial power distinctions of the later 19th century began to solidify.

THAT THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF FRONTIER HYBRIDITY and the gradual extension of cultural and racial assimilation in the Eastern Cape was seen up to the 1830s as a viable way of resolving the problems of the colony, is borne out by a report of Crown Commissioners J. T. Bigge and William Colebrooke, published in 1830. They claimed that such integration had been the aim of Governor Caledon’s proclamation of 1809 and that the attempt to set up segregated establishments such as the Kat River Settlement for the Khoi was an error. Instead, they argued, the aim should be “to promote assimilation in the most satisfactory manner,” by encouraging English settlers and Boers to take up land among the Khoi. “In time [they argued] thriving and independent communities would thus be formed, where the recognition of equal rights in individuals of all classes would secure their equal protection, and a common participation in their internal administration” (59–60).

One wonders what would have happened if Bigge’s and Colebrooke’s extraordinarily enlightened and far-sighted policy had been put into practice. At the very least, their recommendation strengthens one’s overall sense that round about 1830, before the British Settlers had gained dominance and before the Great Trek had gained momentum, there had been a moment in the history of this frontier when the Boers, particularly, could have merged into the transracial and transcultural dynamics developing in the Eastern Cape. But the moment soon passed, and by 1850 it was over. Or perhaps not quite. The very Kat River Settlement that Bigge and Colebrook frowned upon seems indeed to have become a center of such hybridization. In the Eighth Frontier War of 1851–52 the settlement was torn apart by the decision of some Khoi from the Blinkwater area, led by Hermanus Matroos, to support the Xhosa, while others supported the colonists. At one point in the hostilities a meeting took place between Matroos and his lieutenants on the one hand, and the loyal Boers and Khoi on the other. The meeting was reported to the Reverend James Read – who wrote it up – by

Cobus Fourie, the Boer Field-Cornet, who stated that he was accompanied by, among others, “my son-in-law, Andries Hatta,” who, in turn, is later referred to as himself a “Hottentot” and who reveals that the Boers had actually sought refuge with the Khoi: “We who are still loyal to the Queen [he said] have undertaken to defend . . . all our white fellow-colonists, who have taken shelter under our wing” (Read 32–33).

But by 1851 some 15,000 Boers had left the Eastern Cape, their republics beyond the Orange and the Vaal were about to be formally recognized, and, as Peires has argued, the radical recommendations of Commissioners Bigge and Colebrooke were precisely among the reasons that had persuaded them to trek (499). This is not the place to explore the complex motivations and dynamics of the Great Trek, but it does seem that at least one powerful impulse was a perhaps only partly-perceived crisis of identity. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee have suggested that a racial-social colonial order had developed at the Cape from the inception of the colony till the late eighteenth century, without much challenge and therefore moderately tolerant of transculturation and miscegenation even as, paradoxically, some colonists also developed an advanced system of racial oppression and exploitation. This racial order came under severe pressure between about 1770 and 1814. The *trekboer* response was to evolve a more explicit “ideology of racism” and to indulge “increasingly in racially discriminatory practices” (523), while, as we have seen, a shadowy, liminal, transgressive frontier hybridity continued to thrive. Indeed, the existence of such a subversive “shadow world” of the frontier could only have intensified the need and determination to resolve any threat to Boer identity. It was then this relatively recently and explicitly articulated ideology of racial difference and superiority that contributed to the Boer decision to leave the colony. Of this, incidentally, some contemporary observers had no doubt. The pseudonymous “Justus,” whose *The Wrongs of the Caffre Nation* of 1837 must be one of the most scathing indictments of the South African racial order to appear until our own time, wrote:

Their emigration is partly to avoid the effect of the emancipation [of slavery] act, by removing their slaves beyond the reach of the law; partly to take possession of boundless estates without having to pay for them; and partly to live unrestrained by any master . . . [and to] spread havoc and destruction amongst the northern tribes. (294–95)

All this could happen because, according to “Justus,” the Boers had “been bred up in the pestilential atmosphere of slavery [and] their ideas have been formed in a school of tyranny” (289), resulting in a “moral disorder such as can scarcely be conceived in England” (viii).

This is devastating language, but my aim here is neither to defend nor to discount it. Rather “Justus’s” censure must be seen as an indication of the extent to which the Boers had quite suddenly become – or had come to be seen as – a major moral problem; specifically, a problem for emerging discourses of race and ethics. Nor was this a view expressed at the time only from the safe distance of London. In two lectures delivered in Cape Town in 1855 the Reverend Edward Solomon captures well a pervasive local anxiety about the kind of impact that the Boers’ need to carve out a niche for themselves in the interior would inevitably have. Solomon’s lectures gave a well-informed survey of “the Native Tribes of the Interior,” not only of the Khoi, the Xhosa, the Namaqua, the Sotho, the Tswana, and other well-identified peoples, but also of the many mixed and intermediate groupings, such as the Basters, Coranna, Griquas, Bergenaars, and others which by then existed on or beyond the frontier. He revealed enlightened concepts of the indeterminacy of race, and was well

aware of the actual intricacies of the drama of ethnic diversity and assimilation which was then unfolding. For these reasons he was profoundly concerned about the impact the Boers north of the Orange were about to have on all around them. The Sand River Convention of 1852 had just acknowledged Transvaal independence, while the Orange Free State had just come into being in 1854. Solomon understood clearly that the Boers, in order to establish and maintain their political and cultural identity, would in future have to be ceaselessly at war with other groups and would thus destabilize the whole sub-continent. He foresaw “a collision now [that] would convulse the whole of that region, and involve the Europeans there in deadly war with all the native tribes around them” (60).

And yet, despite indictments such as “Justus’s” and gloom such as Solomon’s, the Boers would continue to be cast in the discourse of the expanding South African frontier as paradoxical figures, sometimes as the pastoral, feudal patriarchs we have already seen, as African as the ground they walked on, sometimes as essential or ambivalent intermediaries and liminal agents, and sometimes as crude, shadowy half-caste marginal go-betweens, as uncertain of loyalty as of race. Harriet Ward’s *Jasper Lyle* (1851) and Thomas Forester’s *Everard Tunstall* (1851) have examples of all of these. Ward’s novel frequently refers to Boers as “white Africans” (e.g., 308). Forester’s romance is the first novel in English to give significant coverage to the Great Trek. Its main Boer protagonist, Conraad van Arneveld, is presented as being in harmony with “the wild and savage aspect of the surrounding scenery which, indeed, was in keeping with his own stern mien and character” (1: 47). He is clearly intended to attract the reader’s sympathy and when, at the end, he joins his compatriots to “trek into the wilderness,” no surprise is evinced that he should do so with his recently married, very pretty, Malay wife (3: 284).

OVER THE NEXT HALF CENTURY the world’s fascination with the identity and character of the Boer would continue. As the mineral revolution of the 1860s and 70s, consequent on the discovery of diamonds and gold in the Orange Free State and Transvaal, picked up to precipitate the crises that eventually led to war, this fascination would become a crucial issue. The American novelist, Mayne Reid, who set several of his romances on the South African frontier, depicted the Boers in the very year of the Reverend Solomon’s lecture as “a brave, strong, healthy, moral, peace-loving, industrious race – lovers of truth, and friends of republican freedom – in short, a noble race of men” (3). The heroic Boer, along with his opposite, the wily recidivist outlaw, would become the stock figures of South African frontier romance in the work of G. A. Henty, George Manville Fenn, Rider Haggard, W. H. G. Kingston, Bertram Mitford, Ernest Glanville, and many another. Nor were these just the perceptions of romance. When George McCall Theal put together his *History of the Boers in South Africa* (1887), which was to be the first major study of the Boers, their provenance and their peregrinations, and was to become foundational in the historiography of the Afrikaner, Theal was particularly anxious to demonstrate the Boers’ racial integrity. Concerned to reconcile Briton and Boer in the interest of imperial hegemony and white colonial nationalism, Theal stressed that the Boers were “men of our own race, they spoke a dialect which our great Alfred would have understood without much difficulty; their religion was that of the people of Scotland.” He particularly insisted that “intermarriages have taken place ever since the colony came under our flag” (265–66). Such insistence on Anglo-Boer consanguinity can only have been inspired by considerable uncertainty over the matter.

If Theal was a crucial figure in the developing discourse of Boer identity, so was Olive Schreiner, whose work shows a remarkable evolution in perception. From presenting in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) a pejorative, hostile image of bigoted lazy Boers entirely in the mould of Barrow, she swung round to a Froudian conception of the Boers on the eve of the Anglo-Boer War. Her *Thoughts on South Africa*, begun in the early 1890s though not published until 1923, explicitly denounces her own original prejudices against the Boers and declares that “in the African Boer we have one of the most intellectually virile and dominant races the world has seen” (15). The phraseology conspicuously betrays its affiliation with the Darwinist racist discourse of the 1890s. In *An English South African’s View of the Situation*, published just before the war, she went a step further and claimed that the Boers were really Englishmen at heart, “fed on English literature, and England is their intellectual home” (80). Schreiner’s deepening interest in and changing view of the Boers in the 1890s may be paralleled in a number of other works of the period, novels such as C. H. Stewart’s *Hans van Donder: A Romance of Boer Life* (1896), Anna Howarth’s *Jan: An Afrikaner* (1898), or Douglas Blackburn’s *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1899), all of which attempt a more nuanced depiction of the Boers and their culture. Furthermore, during the late 1890s an Afrikaans literature of national identity also began to take shape, confirming a preoccupation with identity among Boer cultural figures analogous to the world’s bemusement over the same issue. The Dutch-Afrikaans author J. F. van Oordt, writing under the pseudonym “D’Arbez,” between 1896 and 1898 produced no fewer than twelve historical novels which, drawing notably on the revisionist history of the Boers by G. M. Theal, created a lasting popular myth among turn-of-the-century Afrikaners in which the pious, gracious pure-Dutch descendants of their founding fathers enacted a heroic racial epic of archetypal conflict between white and black, good and evil, civilization and savagery (Huigen, ch. 4).

On the eve of the Anglo-Boer War a number of influential texts returned to suspicions about Boer cultural and racial identity which the works we have just looked at had attempted to allay. James Bryce’s *Impressions of South Africa* ran to several editions between 1897 and the end of the war. Bryce confirmed the Reverend Solomon’s prognosis of 1855, namely that the Boers after 1836 would be plunged into the dual dynamics of cultural isolation on the one hand and racial conflict on the other. He warned that the developing conflict between Boer and Briton resulted from “far more than the jealousy of two races. There has been a collision of two types of civilization, one belonging to the nineteenth century, the other to the seventeenth” (454). Isolated before 1795 and again since 1836, argued Bryce, the Boers had been sealed into an anachronistic world view and a fatalistic Puritan racial identity which they then had to uphold by violence (456). Just as influential as Bryce’s work was Percy Fitzpatrick’s *The Transvaal from Within*, which ran to five impressions between September and November 1899. Fitzpatrick warned that the Boers would turn out to be courageous but cunning, tough but treacherous (41–42, 48, 50) and could not be assumed to share the values and mentality of Englishmen. W. W. Treleaven, writing in the *Manchester Guardian* at the same time, made much of the fact that Boer self-identity was obsessively racialized: “The natives to them are Canaanites – people under a ban, to be either exterminated or enslaved. Altogether the Boers are a simple pastoral people, a unique survival of the 17th century, which their isolation and distance from European life have made possible” (Sept. 30, 1899).

No wonder that once the war broke out, the ensuing international debate about the causes and conduct of the war acquired a substantial racial inflection. One of the ironies of the old

canard that the Anglo-Boer War was a “white man’s war” is that this catch-phrase was invoked not only to pretend that Blacks were not involved in the conflict but also as a response to the problematics raised by the perceived cultural and racial ambiguity of the Boers. The image of the Boers as peaceful, pastoral, idyllic avatars of a lost European golden age became iconic throughout an Anglophobic Europe and in much of the pro-Boer discourse in the English-speaking world itself (Van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge*). In the imperialist Anglo-Saxon polemics of the time, however, it was exactly the “Europeanness” of the Boers that was repeatedly challenged. Opponents of imperialism and the war appreciated that nineteenth-century British imperialism had largely been fostered on the conquest and government of other-than-white people of the non-European world, notably Indian and African. Henry Scott Holland, editor of the anti-war monthly, *Commonwealth*, attempted to address this dilemma in October 1901:

Why is it that the war in South Africa offers no real standard of what constitutes true imperialism? Because no normal development of the Empire ought to include the conquest of a white race The Empire, as a moral ideal, has never contemplated so harsh a possibility as that of having to break up a white nationality, and then to rule it by compulsion. (302)

J. A. Hobson’s *The War in South Africa* (1900), the first of a trilogy of works which are often regarded as mounting the most sustained critique of both the war and its imperialist foundations, is actually much more nervous about racial conflict between Briton and Boer than between White and Black. Like Theal, Hobson is anxious to stress racial brotherhood and intermarriage between the Boers and the British precisely to ensure hegemony over South Africa’s Blacks – his chapters on “The Race Conflict in South Africa” (46–52) and “The Natives in South Africa” (279–95) make that abundantly clear.

Olive Schreiner, living under house arrest in Hanover in the Eastern Cape, bombarded her friends in Cape Town (Betty Molteno, Alice Greene, and Anna Purcell) with letters which stressed the consanguinity of Boer and Englishman and hence her outrage that East Cape English citizens were forced to watch the execution of their fellow-Cape Rebels. To her sister-in-law, Mrs. W. P. Schreiner, she wrote on March 5, 1900: “I am working hard to get my book on the Boers finished, so that I may send it to England and America in a fortnight’s time” (Ms Letters). The book was presumably *Thoughts on South Africa*, not published at the time, though a crucial chapter, “The African Boer,” stressing the racial and cultural kinship of Boer and Englishman, was serialized in *Ethical World* during 1900. Her Cape Town friends busily and successfully disseminated her ideas to the international humanitarian anti-war and pro-Boer press, notably *New Age*, to which they also contributed poems highlighting the heroic European republican tradition in which Boer resistance had to be seen (*Songs of the Veld*; and see Van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge*, ch. 5).

As Claire Hirschfeld has shown, the humanitarian anti-war movement ran into considerable difficulties over defending the Boers against the background of their own appalling treatment of Blacks. An editorial in *Justice*, “Socialists and the War” (Jan. 13, 1900), explained that all social democrats should for the time being support the Boers, since they were republican and much more liberal than the British government, but should the “natives” rise, social democrats should support them, as they were the real occupants of the land. No wonder the editor concluded that the war “does seem to have occasioned some confusion of thought among a certain number of Socialists.” But such arguments, in drawing

attention to the ethical problems of a “white man’s war” in Black men’s country, simply exacerbated the racial inflection that the whole debate about the war repeatedly exhibited. One could say that, at a profound level, the whole massive international pacifist, socialist, humanitarian, feminist, anti-British, and anti-imperialist campaign on behalf of the Boers was racialized. In countries such as Germany, Holland, and France this racialization was often crudely obvious, as Anglophobic reactionaries here attempted to reclaim the Boers as idealized Europeans against what were taken to be perfidious British attempts to reduce them to the level of African savages. In Britain the racialization of the anti-war effort took the more subtle form of what one might call the sentiment of racial familiarity, suggested by Olive Schreiner. Thus appeals to seeing the Boers as no different racially from the British energized what was to become the twentieth century’s first major manifestation of what Sandi Cooper calls “liberal internationalism” (204), and Michael Ignatieff “moral universalism” (8).

All this was clearly understood by Rudyard Kipling who, in his three major Boer War stories, repeatedly returns to the racial ambiguity of the Boers (Van Wyk Smith, “Telling the Boer War”), most viciously so in “A Sahib’s War.” Narrated by a Sikh cavalry trooper, the story explicitly rejects the notion that the war was a “sahib’s” or “white man’s” war, on the grounds that the Boers were as treacherous ethically as they were dubious ethnically. Describing the Boers throughout as “ring-straked” (i.e., half-caste), the Sikh regards them as no different from any other rebellious tribe on the borders of the Empire, like Afghans or Pathans, and suggests that had the British not had qualms about the matter, the Indian Army could have come and made short shrift of the Boers. Kipling was touching a raw nerve here in the controversy surrounding the war. An editorial in the *New Century Review* of December 1900 anticipated that all the war would have achieved would be “the sullen race-hatred of unborn generations,” and after the war the British Government could hardly move fast enough to avert such a situation. In his *Racial Supremacy, being studies in Imperialism* of 1905, John George Godard revisited Lord Rosebery’s famous question posed in his University of Glasgow Rectorial Address of 1900, “What is Empire but the Supremacy of Race?” Godard exposed the fallacies in Rosebery’s argument in general and in their application to the Boers in particular. His work suggests that we should see the whole subsequent process of liberal rapprochement between Briton and Boer, issuing in the rapid restoration of Afrikaner power in South Africa and the British Government’s failure to secure the political future of Blacks, in the light of these anxieties to regularize the racial status of the Boers. In turn, of course, the racialization of South Africa’s political dispensation from the war onwards would make this country the very epitome of one of the new century’s most urgent concerns, the discourse of race. For the Boers, or rather now the Afrikaners, there was never any doubt after the war that the ensuing struggle would be about race. It would become one of the more intriguing ironies of the century that an international discourse of anti-racism should come to thrive on the condemnation of the very people in whose support it was first formulated.

IF THE PRO-BOER DISCOURSE OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR was substantially energized by a racial inflection, a pre-occupation which then acquired a life of its own, much the same happened to the more generally humanitarian impulse of the anti-war campaign. A pacifist discourse which initially drew on sympathetic outrage in support of the Boers, quickly evolved into a rapidly expanding concern with what George Sturt (who as “George Bourne” wrote *The Wheelwright’s Shop*) called “the abstract morality of war” (June 10, 1900). Quite rightly he wondered whether “ever before men concerned themselves so much about the abstract

morality of a war.” In the pacifist monthly, *Brotherhood*, G. Bruce Wallace argued that British imperialism had failed to keep up with the evolution of civilization into a whole new phase: “Our national and imperial creed in action . . . is an ignoble creed; a low stage of thought; a state of ignorance and darkness.” Stanton Coit, editor of *Ethical World*, claimed that “never in this generation has there been among Englishmen of all classes so much self-searching, such self-doubt, as now.” And as the war drew to a close, Walter Walsh published his book, *The Moral Damage of War* (1902), reflecting a generalized condemnation of war that all of the twentieth century’s subsequent conflicts would only reinforce: “The damage [war] inflicts upon the persons and property of men is trifling beside the damage it inflicts upon morals; and it is this that is exciting in thoughtful minds a fresh interest in the whole military conception” (7). Thomas Hardy, initiating in poems such as “Drummer Hodge” a primary concern with what Wilfrid Owen would later call “the pity of war,” portrayed war as an existential disaster, a crime against both the human and the cosmic spirit, and he was only the most famous of scores of poets who reflected a fundamental shift in Western conceptions of war. If we want to know how, at the end of the twentieth century, we come to inhabit a world in which the condemnation of war and imperialism in public morality is all but total, we have to begin with the Anglo-Boer War.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has remarked that “human beings [now] are more aware of human rights than ever before” (SABC 3 News, 20:00, May 12, 1999). Michael Ignatieff has argued that, despite the world’s continued disastrous propensity for war, violence, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the like, one achievement of our time is the growth of a culture of human rights, “a narrative of compassion” (4), the belief that we live in a “moral universe” in which crimes such as racial repression, ethnic cleansing, large-scale violence within and between nations “*should* be our business” (4):

Weak as the narrative of compassion and moral commitment may be, it is infinitely stronger than it was only fifty years ago. We are scarcely aware of the extent to which our moral imagination has been transformed since 1945 by the growth of a language and practice of moral universalism, expressed above all in a shared human rights culture. (8)

I believe that this “internationalization of conscience,” as Ignatieff also calls it (10), found its first major expression, if not its foundation, in the anti-war discourse of the Anglo-Boer War. In this area, as in that of an international moral conscience about race, the Anglo-Boer War redrew the parameters of the debate. The consequences for our assessment of the lasting impact of the war must be considerable. One might agree with students of the early twentieth century that, in the arena of the political and diplomatic power-play of imperial Europe, the Boer War’s effect on events that led to the First World War was probably minimal. If, however, we turn to what might be called the iconic status of the war, and we consider how the controversies surrounding and affected by the war initiated two of the century’s major discourses, that of race and that of “moral internationalism,” the legacy of the Anglo-Boer War is all but incalculable in magnitude, and quite beyond the range of what might have been expected of a conflict which Reginald Auberon, writing shortly after the Great War, dismissed as “the rumbling clash and clamour of a parochial struggle” (Preface).

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