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Reading the Writings of Empire: Mass Media and the Boer War

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Renewed interest in the historical events that marked the turn of the twentieth century in South Africa prompted by the centenary of the start of the Boer War makes this a timely engagement with a discursive field that remains curiously current despite the passage of time. In her book Paula M. Krebs addresses an arena that even a long view--with the possibilities for objectivity this may have generated--suggests is still contested. In the process she makes a substantial contribution to the study of a war that mobilised intense passions at the time and, certainly, in the current theoretical debates about the silences in, and absences from, circulating critical discourses (particularly where they are inflected for race) continues to elicit passionate reactions. The analysis offered here of the power structures of Empire that obtained at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to the role of the New Journalism in its promulgation, illuminates a field that is still, perhaps, too readily perceived from a partisan perspective.

Krebs takes as her starting point a detailed survey of the media representations of the "last of the gentlemen's wars" [1] doing so from a theoretical position that I would describe as feminist-materialist. She argues that within cultural and literary studies there is a gap in the theoretical investigation of the Boer War, critics having omitted to engage systematically with the role of the media, particularly the print media in the guise of the mass circulating New Journalism of (among others) the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Her project in this book, then, is to engage critically with this perceived omission and then to extend her insights about the scope and nature of public discourse during this historical moment, to an analysis of the complex and divergent roles of late Victorian literary figures in the ideological construction of Empire and its impact on the war in South Africa. Her focus in the book is less on military strategy or the course of the war and its setbacks for the British, than on the cultural and political conditions that generated particular responses especially as they were produced by the propaganda offensive that marked the conduct of a war that was like no other previous imperial war. Fought between two white armies largely for territorial control over imperial capitalists' interests in the rich minefields of South Africa (and permitting the black indigene no voice in the debate), it was presented as a foregone conclusion that, begun in October 1899, the

war would be over by Christmas. Krebs' interest is in foregrounding the interplay of gender and race in the public discourses that ensued and she offers an insightful critique of the hegemonic complicity of the press in Britain (something that previous cultural theorists such as Anne McClintock [2] have failed to do adequately) as well as a critical assessment of the role played by influential literary figures such as Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Olive Schreiner and Rudyard Kipling in the creation of what she terms the "imperial imaginary".

A surprising omission in a book that deals with the effects on public perceptions of the power of the new mass media is any assessment of the role film and photojournalism played in this, the first media war [3], particularly in representing the events on the far-distant battlefields to a readership of mass circulating newspapers hungry for images such as that of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. This new medium and its impact on the issues being focussed on here was an important adjunct in the dissemination of information about the war in South Africa and the photographic and filmic reports were at least as significant in the circulation of information as the printed word, which is the explicit focus of Krebs' analysis.

Krebs' critical engagement is strongest when she is dealing with the representation of the Boer War to a British public no longer capable of a univocal construction. She demonstrates the degree to which the notion of "public opinion" needs to be problematised arguing that by the time the war began there was no easy way to define "the public" itself because "... a new variety in the press paralleled a new variety of publics: a large, literate electorate and even some of the non-enfranchised--women" (p. 7). Her argument, demonstrating as it does the ways in which the propaganda being generated by the press could result in the popular frenzy that surrounded the relief of Mafeking, goes some way to explaining the oppositional responses to be found in the later expos by Emily Hobhouse of the conditions in the concentration camps. The collation of material in this chapter rehearses much that has gone before in one of the (arguably) most often negotiated issues of the Boer War but she does remind the reader of the notable absences from critical discussion (until relatively recently) of the impact of Roberts' and then Kitchener's policies on the black populations of South Africa. Because, however, the emphasis is on the circulation of imperial ideas in the discourses of Empire, the racial factor--while certainly noted and commented upon--does not receive the in-depth treatment that the gender issues (as they relate to the concentration camps) do.

Krebs' reading of gender ideology as it applied during the Boer War and the debate on chivalry conducted through the press between Arthur Conan-Doyle and W.T. Stead is at once careful and perceptive: she provides much detailed source material allowing the reader to follow her line of argument and to draw her/his own conclusions. The materialist feminist emphasis of her critical orientation is always provocative but, though her even-handed approach, her balanced assessments of the implications of the opposing views on the camps and the role of government policy which she details are admirable, I longed, at times, to hear her voice, to know how she judged the claims and counter claims being purveyed through the popular press and the more serious papers, such as the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times*. It appears at times as if Krebs has fallen prey to the very activity she would eschew, namely offering an embedded truth claim about the dominance of these two adversarially organised perspectives without offering a corresponding exploration of the reception that these two views received from people suffering the effects of the war. The point here is that by stressing these two perspectives Krebs reproduces the impression that they dominated the discursive field and she runs the risk of simplifying both the complexity of the debates and the complexity of the affective impact of the war on so many people. A critical perspective that locates the reader epistemically in the domain of reception in such a way that the material

engagement by the popular reception of these views can be charted would be welcome. It would, I believe, lie somewhere between the adversarial constructions of the British Tommy as chivalrous hero and the Boer as savage primitive (Conan-Doyle's position) on the one hand, and Tommy Atkins as the barbarian, the Boer farmer as a dignified, brave opponent (Stead's), on the other.

What the reader requires in this section of the book, particularly, is a tracking of the real suffering occasioned by the war and how that achieved political articulation, material features of the situation not addressed by the exploration of competing propaganda initiatives however incisive the particular assessment may be. A historical materialist approach that interprets the ideological discourses more explicitly against the reality they attempt to transform would strengthen the chapters on gender ideology that deal with the concentration camps and the question of sexual honour she foregrounds there.

To amplify my point here a little further: my reservations concern the approach taken towards the discourses of the concentration camps that came into circulation through Emily Hobhouse's writings and the Report of Millicent Fawcett's Ladies' Commission. The studied application of a theoretical style of objectivity that presents both sides of a moral debate with deliberate neutrality but which denies the reader the required pattern of outrage that plays a large part in the mobilisation of later political programmes diminishes the material reality of the experience. The deaths in the concentration camps of in excess of twenty-six thousand Boer women and children, and a contested, but equally excessive figure (around sixteen thousand) for the deaths of blacks in the camps, cast a very long shadow indeed over the political terrain in South Africa. A neutral presentation of competing debates arguing on the one side a case that legitimates moral outrage, and on the other, a jingoistic position that whitewashes moral turpitude constitutes, I believe, a false objectivity. Furthermore such a stance probably precludes an analyst from tracing in the material world consequences that flow from a sense of outrage that cannot be brought into focus by a style of analysis that refrains from commenting on the way the moral cards fall and consequently is incapable of addressing the psychological states engendered by those moral readings that were to play so large a role in the construction of Afrikaner identity. The erosion of a unified moral perspective is probably not intentional, but it is, I believe, the limitation of a transposition of attitudes of objectivity (where bias is consciously quarantined) to a notion of even-handedness expressed in being non-committal on important issues where disagreement exists. Afrikaner arguments, grounded in suffering, established in their eyes the conviction that they were the victims of a gross injustice for which they paid the price of a holocaust of their women and children. The relatively recent emergence of the figures of black deaths in the camps [4] is also, legitimately, going to occasion a demand for redress; a demand made more complex by the fact that it will be directed at both the Boers and the British. An analytic framework informed by this notion of objectivity perhaps explains Krebs' difficulty in reading the role of moral unease as a motivating factor in Schreiner's work.

The chapter on Olive Schreiner's role in interpreting the war to Britain, while revealing a discomfort about Schreiner's shifts between socially astute commentary and (for a contemporary readership) painful perspectives on questions of miscegenation, is nevertheless insightful. Krebs' analysis of the importance of her non-fiction, particularly her position on race, is significant. Schreiner's view that she wrote as a strategy for social change is taken seriously and Krebs demonstrates that she was, indeed, prescient in her critique of the cultural formations that obtained in the relations between the British and the Afrikaner, the Afrikaner and the Africans. She argues convincingly that while Schreiner advances an evolutionary theory of race, underpinned by the tenets of Social Darwinism, there is evidence of her awareness of complexity in the theories of race and ethnicity produced in her

pamphlet, *An English South African's View of the Situation* [5] and the later essays, *Thoughts on South Africa*[6]. That Schreiner's fiction presents a problematically patronising view of the racial "other" is not disputed; Krebs argues, justifiably, that her non-fiction, however, "demands a more complex evaluation (p. 140). She acknowledges Schreiner's prescience in recognising the lay of the moral terrain: "...a white country divided by its very nature, with a future, ... that could only lie with unity. Boers could not exist without Africans, nor English without Boers" (Ibid.).

In her final chapter Krebs offers a penetrating and insightful assessment of the contributions of the colonial writers, Rider Haggard and Kipling, to the construction of the imperial imaginary. She rightly perceives the limitations of Kipling's writings about the protagonists (other than the British) in this conflict in South Africa, arguing with Renee Durbach [7] that in his work no understanding of the Afrikaner or the black inhabitants is evident. This is contrasted with Rider Haggard, whose experiences within the colony informed his romances where with some degree of "authenticity" he constructs what she calls an "imaginary Africa" (p. 149). Although [t]he Boer War's intersection with the New Journalism produced a natural place for Kipling (p 156) and though he became its spokesperson, part of a project to shore up an "imperial imaginary", Kipling fails to produce the "coherent, unified empire" (p. 156) demanded of him. This chapter reveals Krebs' subtlety as an analyst: her argument demonstrates the failure of the writers of the period to reinforce a univocal ideology of Empire, premised on the fact that just as the notion of "the public" had to be problematised, so too did the idea of a "seamless ideology of imperialism" require reconsideration. For this reason, her critiques of the writings of Schreiner, Conan-Doyle, Rider Haggard and Kipling are valuable: they reveal the complexities of the race, gender and class constructions that were a part of the matrix of British imperialism.

Krebs' book offers the reader a wealth of original material and is exhaustively referenced. The argument is a powerful one and it is convincingly supported by example. The few reservations I have do not detract from the value of this book at this time: it makes a substantial contribution to the study of the discourses of a war that remains, a century later, still capable of arousing passions in South Africa. It is salutary as a new Empire mobilises against a far-off country to be reminded of the ideological complexities of race, class, ethnicity and gender as we negotiate the minefields literally and figuratively of a "global imaginary".

Notes

[1]. The title of a book by J.F.C.Fuller, subtitled *A Subaltern's Journal of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* published in 1937 by Faber, London.

[2]. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

[3]. See the compilation of material on this subject in the television documentary: "The Boer War: The First Media War", *Invision* BBC, 1998.

[4]. See the interview with Stowell Kessler. Newton Kanhema, "The Victims that Boer War Historians Forgot", *The Star and South African Times International*, September 25, 1996.

[5]. Olive Schreiner, *An English South African's View of the Situation*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899.

[6]. Olive Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*. Johannesburg: Afrikaner Book Society, Africana Reprint Library Vol. X, 1976.

[7]. Renee Durbach. *Kipling's South Africa*. Plumstead, South Africa: Chameleon. 1988. Quoted in Krebs, p 167.

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