

GENDER, RACE, AND THE WRITING OF EMPIRE

Public Discourse and the Boer War

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CHAPTER I

The war at home

In the 1939 Shirley Temple film of the classic children's story *A Little Princess*, young Sara Crewe rousts all the slumbering residents of Miss Minchin's Female Seminary from their beds with the cry of "Mafeking is relieved! Mafeking is relieved!" Sara patriotically drags her schoolmates and teachers into the wild London street celebrations marking the end of the Boer War siege that she and the rest of England had been following in the newspapers for months. This particular scene in the film seems a bit odd to those familiar with Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel (1905), however, because the novel never mentions the Boer War – Sara's father is posted in India, not South Africa. But in 1939, it was better to send Captain Crewe to Mafeking. With Britain at war and the United States weighing its options, fellow-feeling for the British was important. If a film was to inspire transatlantic loyalties, to remind American audiences of the kind of stuff those Brits were made of, then Mafeking Night was a perfect image to use. Mafeking, in the early part of the century, still meant wartime hope, British pluck, and home-front patriotism. Using Mafeking Night as its centerpiece, *The Little Princess* (the film's title) was a kind of *Mrs. Miniver* for children.

Mafeking Night must have been an irresistible choice for the makers of *The Little Princess* – it had military glory, class-mixing, and rowdiness in the gaslit streets of nostalgia-laden Victorian London. The scene had been truly unprecedented.¹ When news of the relief of Mafeking reached London at 9:17 p.m. on Friday 18 May 1900, thanks to a Reuters News Agency telegram, central London exploded. Thousands danced, drank, kissed, and created general uproar. In what has been seen as perhaps the premier expression of crude public support of late-Victorian imperialism, Liverpool, Newcastle, Birmingham, York, and Glasgow rioted with fireworks, brass bands, and blasts on factory sirens. This celebration of empire was made possible by the new halfpenny press that spread the daily news to thousands of households

that had never before read a newspaper daily. The most significant spontaneous public eruption in London since the 1886 Trafalgar Square riots, Mafeking Night could hardly have been more different in character from those protests of unemployment. Economic theorist J. A. Hobson, and V. I. Lenin, whose *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) grew directly from Hobson's writings, argued that imperialism distracted the British working classes from their economic problems by promising payoffs from afar in imperial trade as well as by replacing class consciousness with nationalism and pride in the empire. Mafeking Night has come down to us as a central symbol of such distraction – the premier image of late-Victorian mass support for nationalism, patriotism, and imperial capitalism.

This chapter argues that the events of Mafeking Night must be read differently. The events that led to the “spontaneous” riots of Mafeking Night show that the celebrations in fact say less about British support for imperialism than they do about the power of the press to tease the British public into a frenzy of anticipation and then to release that tension in a rush of carefully-directed enthusiasm. Mafeking Night symbolizes what J. A. Hobson saw as the dangerous power of the popular press in creating imperial sentiment in the service of capitalism. It is a compilation of the power of some other very important symbols that were at work in support of imperialism – symbols of British masculinity, class structure, and patronage of “lower races.” Each of these symbols is at work in the making of Mafeking Night, and each holds some profound contradictions in the period of the Boer War, which is why Mafeking Night itself is such a highly ambiguous symbol of Victorian support for imperialism.

Mafeking Night made jingoism safe for the middle classes by blurring the distinction between jingoism, which had been seen as working-class over-enthusiasm for the empire, and patriotism, that middle-class virtue of support for one's country against foreign opposition. Mafeking Night defused the threat that had been posed by mass action in London, such as the bloody Trafalgar Square riots of just fourteen years before. Anne McClintock points out the fear of the “crowd” in late-Victorian London: “In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the urban crowd became a recurring fetish for ruling-class fears of social unrest and underclass militancy. Lurking in the resplendent metropolis, the crowd embodied a ‘savage’ and dangerous underclass waiting to spring upon the propertied classes” (*Imperial Leather* 118–19). The nineteenth-century study of crowd psychology, which began with examinations of the

French Revolution and the Paris Commune, focused on fear, as J. S. McClelland points out in *The Crowd and the Mob* (200). By the publication of Gustave Le Bon's book on the crowd (published in English in 1899 as *The Psychology of Peoples*), "crowd psychology had long been chipping away at the sense of distance which ordinary, civilized, law-abiding men had always felt when they looked at crowds" (McClelland *The Crowd and the Mob* 200), and Le Bon's elitism encouraged a middle-class fear of being subsumed into an underclass crowd. Mafeking Night was a mass action in the streets, but it was neither produced nor controlled by the working classes. Young Sara Crewe would have been perfectly safe in the 18 and 19 May outdoor revels in the West End of London, for they had nothing at all in common with working-class protests of unemployment or with the worker unrest that had terrified the ruling classes earlier in the century. In the newspaper versions of the event, Mafeking Night was a middle-class party (with some working-class guests). The date had been set and invitations issued by lower-middle-class media – the popular press.

In a Victorian Britain where masses in the streets had always meant strikes and riots, there had been no precedent for large-scale public celebration – even the public celebrations of victory over Napoleon had been relatively small and sedate. But the British people surged into the twentieth century when they poured into the West End to celebrate the relief of Mafeking. Newspapers and journals touted the mixed-class nature of the Mafeking festivities: costermongers mingled with gentlemen. The rioters were not working-class radicals, threatening the political or social order. In the language the press used to describe Mafeking Night and the following day, they were "everyone" and "London" and even "England." They were created as a group by the newspapers, and this chapter examines the mechanism of their creation and the function of them as a group representing "public opinion."

After the demise of the eighteenth-century coffeehouse culture around which Jürgen Habermas formed his concept of the "public sphere," the arena through which governments heard feedback from elite social groups about public policies, the equivalent forum for public exchange of ideas became the periodicals – the reviews and even the magazines.² But by the end of the Victorian period, the periodicals, though still prestigious as public forums, were losing their pride of place in public opinion formation to the newspapers. With the spread of literacy after the Education Act of 1870 and the emergence of the new popular press, some political debates, including questions about South

Africa, shifted to the newspapers. As “public” took on new meanings in the nineteenth century, as new publics were being created that included women and the lower-middle and working classes, the quality and the popular press, daily and weekly, became the “public sphere,” and public discourse of many kinds became important in the creation of government and even military policy.

The Reform Acts of 1832 and 1870 had begun to create a new relationship between the government and the “public” in Britain. Historians of public opinion, such as J.A.W. Gunn and Dror Wahrman, recognize the significance of newspapers in public opinion, even if they rarely resolve whether the press shapes or reflects public opinion. But the eighteenth-century newspaper, and even the 1830s newspaper, was a qualitatively and quantitatively different thing from the daily of 1899, and the publics reached by the end-of-century newspapers were very different indeed from earlier ones. After the establishment of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, as tabloid journalism emerged coincident with the New Imperialism, public opinion about the Boer War became quite directly dependent on newspapers. With the New Journalism, the newspaper-reading public was a far wider collection of people in 1899 than it had been during any previous British war. But while the popular press thrived on the daily drama of war reporting from South Africa and benefited in circulation figures and influence from the war, the government’s colonial and war policies benefited just as much from the success of the halfpenny papers, especially the *Daily Mail*.

To consider terms such as public discourse, public sphere, and public opinion as useful analytical tools for an examination of imperial ideology, we must first understand turn-of-the-century creation of “the public.” As Mary Poovey (“Abortion Question”), Judith Butler (“Contingent Foundations”), and other feminist theorists have shown, discourses that presuppose a unified, universal subject, such as arguments that rely on a language of “rights,” are implicated in the creation of that subject. The subject, Poovey argues, is a gendered, mythical construction that is deemed to have “personhood” based on an inner essence that must pre-exist it (“Abortion Question” 240). The creation of the “public” by late-nineteenth-century newspapers and political officials can be considered similarly to the ways Poovey and Butler consider the construction of the liberal individual political subject – the system ends up constructing the very subject whose existence it thinks it is acknowledging. In the events of Mafeking Night we see the emergence of a British public that observers had been assuming existed all the while that

they were creating it. The newspapers were considering “what the public wants” while teaching it what to want, and the celebrations of Mafeking Night served as both evidence that there was one “public” in Britain and as example of the effectiveness of the press, in consultation with the military and the Colonial Office, in the creation of that public out of many separate and distinct publics.

WAR AND THE PUBLIC

The Boer War marked an important turning point for imperial Britain. The war, fought by two white armies for control over a land where whites were far outnumbered by indigenous Africans, pitted the British Empire against the farmers (the literal translation of “Boers”) of Dutch descent who lived in the two South African republics. In Britain, the Boers were seen as backward, petty tyrants who sought to exploit British settlers in the gold-mining districts of the Witwatersrand. When war was declared in October 1899, it was general knowledge in Britain that the ragged bands (“commandos”) of untrained Boer soldiers riding ponies could never mount a credible attack on the British army, and the war would be over by Christmas. But, as Oscar Wilde had said, wars are never over by Christmas, and this one dragged on for almost three years, as British fighting methods, horses, supplies, and health all proved inadequate to the task. Although few British statesmen came out fully against the war, by the war’s end the rest of Europe vehemently denounced the British cause and fighting methods, and conflict about the methods employed by the British army resulted in a split in the already divided Liberal party and in public opinion throughout Britain.

From the newspaper coverage of the war in popular and quality dailies to the private correspondence of public figures, writings about the war reveal splits in public opinion and serious new concerns about British imperialism. Concern about British aims in southern Africa had been stirred in late 1895, when entrepreneur Cecil Rhodes’ ally Leander Starr Jameson had led an abortive raid against the Boer government of the Transvaal. Jameson had been trying to stir up rebellion among the “uitlanders,” the mostly-British foreigners working in the mining district, so Britain could justify annexing the region, and it was easy to portray the Boer War that came three years later as a government-led attempt to achieve what Rhodes had been unable to achieve with the Jameson Raid – a Transvaal in the political control of the British rather than the Boer farmers.

In looking at Mafeking Night, this chapter problematizes the concept of public opinion and its relation to late-Victorian imperialism, examining the assumptions about, for example, race, gender, evolution, and economics under which the ideology of imperialism was operating. It all starts with Mafeking Night – the celebrations that marked that event point to the issues that characterized the rest of the war. The Mafeking Night celebrations have been portrayed as spontaneous, unproblematically patriotic, and at the same time nationally uncharacteristic. That is, they were distinctly un-British: Kipling wrote to William Alexander Fraser shortly after Mafeking Night, “You’ve seen something that I never suspected lay in the national character – the nation letting itself go.”³³ But that hitherto hidden side of the national character was not as spontaneously revealed as Kipling implied: Carrie Kipling noted in her diary on Mafeking Night that it was her husband himself who was responsible for the celebrations at Rottingdean, where he had roused the “inhabitants to celebrate” the relief of Mafeking (quoted in Pinney *Letters* 18).

The events surrounding the relief of Mafeking prove characteristic of both the New Imperialism and the New Journalism. The interlocking of these two developments allowed the Anglo-Boer to be what one soldier called “the last of the gentlemen’s wars,”³⁴ with all the gender, race, and class-based associations inherent in the phrase, but made it also the first of the sensation-mongers’ wars. And the sensation journalism that supported the New Imperialism called into question some of the central assumptions behind the concept of the British gentleman.

The press had, since the eighteenth century, been seen as an important influence on “public opinion,” as it was defined by government and opposition. But, with the Reform Acts and the Education Act of 1870 creating an expanded and more literate electorate, the late-Victorian press had come to assume an even more significant role in the determination of public opinion. Critics such as J. A. Hobson attributed much power to the press in creating and sustaining mass support for imperialism. But Hobson’s critique of imperialism has a strong anti-working-class bias: the public he sees as deluded into supporting imperialism is the workers. Hobson was right to the extent that the new popular press was not aimed at the constituency thought to make up public opinion earlier in the century. The *Daily Mail*, the newspaper Salisbury is reported to have said was “written by office boys for office boys” (quoted in Ensor *England* 313), sought a different public than such venerable organs as *The Times*. It was not until the New Journalism that news-

papers could be said to reach readers who were not at least upper-middle class. The penny dailies (and the threepenny *Times*) aimed at political influence and sought it in the traditional readership of the daily press. But the new halfpennies, starting with the *Daily Mail*, sought huge circulations and the profits that accompanied them. While “public opinion” from the early eighteenth-century origin of the term seems to have meant the opinion of that part of the public that constituted the electorate, public opinion by the time of the Boer War was not so easily defined. The new variety in the press paralleled a new variety of publics: a large, literate electorate and even some of the non-enfranchised – women. (The *Daily Mail* ran regular features directed at its female readers, including fiction and fashion articles.) The Mafeking Night celebrations were the product of the new newspapers’ relationships with the new British publics they were creating, and the celebrations, while they would seem to demonstrate “common sense,”⁵ natural support for imperialism in turn-of-the-century Britain, actually reveal that such support was carefully manufactured through the press by a careful manipulation of public opinion(s) to create a very temporary spasm of jingoism.

The jingoism/patriotism of Mafeking Night helped to rally national and, indeed, imperial sentiment behind a war that had not been going well. Because of a series of British setbacks early in the war, it had become important that something potent emerge to bring Britons together in support of the conflict. A symbol would need to evoke sentiments that could unite Britons, whether or not they supported Joseph Chamberlain in the Colonial Office, the embattled War Office, or the war itself. The million-circulation *Daily Mail* and its allies in the new popular journalism of the late 1890s handed the British government the answer: The siege of Mafeking, with its strong, masculine hero in Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, its plucky British civilians (including the elegant Lady Sarah Wilson) making the best of a bad lot, and its loyal African population rallying behind the Union Jack, was a war publicist’s dream. The popular press beat the drum for Britain, and, while it did not succeed in converting the nation wholesale into jingoes, it managed nevertheless to produce in Mafeking Night itself a spectacle of English enthusiasm for empire that united class with class and provided an image of imperial solidarity to inspire much-needed support for the war.

By the 1899 start of the Boer War, imperialism had entered British public discourse in countless ways; John MacKenzie’s work on propaganda and empire points to the myriad symbols of empire in everyday

life by the turn of the century. Everything from biscuit tins to advertisements to schoolbooks, as Kathryn Castle shows, reminded Britons of “their” empire. Edward Said talks of the place of imperialism in the works of “Ruskin, Tennyson, Meredith, Dickens, Arnold, Thackeray, George Eliot, Carlyle, Mill – in short, the full roster of significant Victorian writers” (*Culture* 126), and of the ways the British imperial identity affected the world view of such figures as they came to “identify themselves with this power” (*Culture* 127) that was imperialism. Literature played a significant part in the development of an imperial imaginary – images and myths about the empire working in conjunction with “facts” coming from the empire – that was necessary to sustain British public support for the economic project of empire.⁶ The final chapter of this book takes up the issue of literary figures and their relation to imperialism during the Boer War. For the purposes of this first chapter, however, I would like to examine the ways the average newspaper-reading public came to “identify [itself] with this power” of imperialism. Rather than tracing imperial themes in literature, as many excellent recent studies have done, this volume examines assumptions about British imperialism and what sustained it in public discourse about the Boer War as well as analyzing the ways various kinds of public discourse functioned to support and critique that imperialism.

MAFEKING MYTH

Despite or perhaps because of the strategic unimportance of the town, the siege of Mafeking became a myth almost as soon as the town was encircled by Boer troops in October 1899. The importance of the myth of Mafeking has been noted, especially in Brian Gardner’s study of *Mafeking: A Victorian Legend*. The present chapter seeks to trace the myth’s origins in the contemporary press treatments of the siege and to examine the importance of the myth-making function of the popular press within the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century. Much cultural studies work on the ideology of imperialism has underplayed the importance of newspapers or seen their role in image-making as relatively straightforward. Anne McClintock, for example, in *Imperial Leather*’s insightful analysis of newspaper photographs, advertisements, and illustrations, devotes almost no attention to the text that surrounded much of the visual material. When she quotes newspapers, it is as historical evidence. But even during the Boer War, commentators were already formulating analyses of the ideological function of the news-

papers, the music halls, the schools, and the pulpits. An examination of such contemporary critiques reveals a complicated picture of how imperialism functioned culturally in turn-of-the-century Britain. J. A. Hobson, W. T. Stead, Olive Schreiner, and other anti-war writers, as well as those writing on the other side, recognized popular culture, including the press, as essential to the war effort. Starting with an examination of *Mafeking Night* and then moving to more detailed analyses of aspects of writing about the South African War, this volume seeks to shift cultural studies' approach to the late-Victorian empire. As McClintock, Preben Kaarholm, and others have pointed out, late-Victorian imperialism was not a cultural monolith: support for the empire coexisted with critiques of aspects of the capitalism that helped to drive it; working-class jingoism sat uneasily with patriotic Britons from other classes who might or might not support the war; the rights of Africans were invoked on the pro- and anti-war sides, with equally vain results. The complexity of the ideologies of imperialism during the Boer War is borne out by this study of a range of texts and authors, all of which were elements in a culture in which empire was assumed and yet critiqued, was understood and yet always needed to be explained, was far away and yet appeared at the breakfast table every morning.

During the last decades of Victoria's reign, as John MacKenzie's work has shown, images of empire abounded in advertising, popular literature and theater, exhibitions, and other cultural spaces. But being inundated with evidence of empire is not the same as supporting the economic or political ideal of British imperialism. Such imperial advocates as H. Rider Haggard bemoaned through the 1880s and 1890s the British public's lack of interest in its own empire. Occasional periodical articles addressed imperial issues, but even the Zulu War and the first conflict with the Boers failed to rouse the British from cozy domestic concerns. The Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, however, was different. It was a long, large-scale war with another white nation, it cost millions of pounds of public money, and it couldn't help but catch the interest of the British public very decisively. The press followed the events of the war in such detail that Haggard decided by the end of the war to give up the idea of writing a series of articles on South Africa for the *Daily Express* – people were sick and tired of constantly reading about South Africa, he said. The key factor in igniting public interest in this imperial conflict was the new popular press of the late 1890s, the cheap, sensation-oriented jingoist reporting and editing that was already known as the New Journalism. The New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century,

which included the direct acquisition by the British government of African land, was generally supported by jingo papers that grew out of the New Journalism. The New Journalism was able to build that support by creating a new sense of the Great British Public, and the buildup to and reporting about Mafeking Night illustrates how it was done.

To begin this exploration of the connections between New Imperialism and New Journalism, we return to the night of 18 May 1900 and the events that led up to it. T. Wemyss Reid, of the *Leeds Mercury*, wrote a monthly column in the *Nineteenth Century* called “The Newspapers,” in which he kept a daily journal of the significant stories in the papers and the public events and trends behind them. Reid was a self-proclaimed “old journalist” and complained regularly about the excesses of the new popular press. We can trace the factors that led up to Mafeking Night through Reid’s chronicle of war coverage after the crushing British defeats of Black Week in December 1899. The setbacks of that week, Reid warned, should:

open the eyes of our Jingo journalists to some of the risks which a great Empire runs when it enters upon a serious military expedition. Hitherto they have seen only the picturesque side of war . . . (January 1900, 164)

Jingo journalists are a new breed during the Boer War, an important part of the style of the New Journalism. Jingo did not mean patriotic – all major British dailies would have considered themselves patriotic, even the very few who opposed the war. Jingo was, rather, a class-inflected concept. The jingo journalist, with screaming headlines and rah-rah attitude, was the press equivalent of the music hall song-and-dance act, as compared to the solid Shakespearians of *The Times* and its fellow “quality” papers. Grumbings about jingoism were coded complaints about the likes of the *Daily Mail*’s pandering to the working classes.

Wemyss Reid’s analysis combines resentment of censorship, a problem throughout the war, with his objections to the popular press: “the news, as we know, is very meagre. Either because of the severity of the censorship, or for some other reason, we have an entire absence of the brilliant descriptive writing we have been accustomed to get in former campaigns. The descriptive element is supplied, indeed, by the sub-editors with their sensational head-lines and inflammatory placards” (January 1900, 165). Reid sees the “descriptive writing” of earlier wars, the colorful, often poignant sketches of the scene of war as well as the battles themselves, as being replaced by two-column headlines and half-truths on placards. This is the doing of the new journalists, for whom sensation replaces analysis. The *Daily Mail* was indeed exaggerat-

ing every cabled bit of news from South Africa into a headline. The surest way to attract customers, the *Daily Mail's* Alfred Harmsworth appeared to believe, was to cheer for the British army as if it were a national football team. According to Reid, knee-jerk jingoism was the central characteristic of the new approach to journalism. Jingoism was, of course, one of the most significant excesses of the *Daily Mail*, but it was by no means its only difference from the quality papers. The older, more respectable newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily News*, or the *Manchester Guardian* were still, in 1900, devoting more attention to parliamentary reporting and political speeches and news than to human-interest stories, crime, and fashion tips.

We can see through Reid how government censorship combined with sensationalism to produce the climate for Mafeking. Reid records the tension around General Buller's ill-fated effort to capture Spion Kop hill (the British walked into a trap and suffered massive casualties). On 15 January 1900, Reid records in his press diary:

Again we are enduring the heavy strain of suspense. The silence that is maintained with regard to General Buller's movements is borne with ill-concealed impatience by the public, as the fluctuating crowds which thronged the portals of the War Office yesterday from morning till late at night proved. Wild rumours ran through the streets and the clubs. Newsboys shouted hoarsely in all our thoroughfares and squares. We were told of defeat, of victory, of great battles at that moment raging . . . But when the silence of night fell upon us, we were still without authentic news. (February 1900, 358–59)

Newspapers tried to sell copies by pretending to have news, telling the public conflicting stories of battles that never happened. But what the papers were selling was not what Reid could call "news." He lays out a contradictory picture of the public: first the "public" is the "fluctuating crowd" thronging the War Office, with no indication of class. But then Reid reveals that there are in fact two kinds of publics in question, those in "the streets" and those in "the clubs." We see a map of central London, its "thoroughfares and squares," its legitimate public spaces. Those to whom the newsboys hawked their illegitimate news, the victims of wild rumor, were "we." But which was the "we"? The people whose domain was the streets or those who dwelt in the clubs?

Two days later Reid complains about the evening jingo journals. Although no morning paper had yet joined the *Daily Mail* in its assault on the journalistic approach of *The Times* and others, the evening papers were closer in kind to the popular appeal of the Harmsworth paper. Reid resents the new sensation-seeking (and circulation-seeking) of the

evening journals' war news: "If only the scandal of the evening newspapers could be repressed, people would begin to be cheerful again; but this afternoon these prints have surpassed themselves in sensationalism and exaggeration" (February 1900, 360). Reid now attributes the mood of the "people" entirely to the New Journalism. He is worried about the mood of the lower-middle-class readers of such papers. The "we" of his earlier account no longer includes him. *His* mood is fine. It's the "people" who are not cheerful. But Reid will go to great lengths to avoid directly mentioning the class associations of the papers with which he quarrels. On 12 February, he finds that "there is much depression to-day" about the siege of Ladysmith (March 1900, 532), and "the general mood to-day is one of depression – undue depression, it seems to me" (March 1900, 533). Here the "general mood" definitely excludes Reid – public depression is unjustified, as it will prove to be shortly thereafter, when Ladysmith is relieved. For Reid, the people who are the public, whose opinion and mood he records, seem to be the readers of the sensationalist papers. But that will change with Mafeking.

THE NATIONAL JOY

From the Spion Kop debacle in February until May, the papers were lacking in any major war news, and other news dominated both the newspapers and Reid's column in the *Nineteenth Century*. On 14 May, Reid records:

Once more the attention of the country is riveted upon the war . . . Much more engrossing for most people than the question of a possible dissolution is the prospect of the early relief of Mafeking. The nerves of the public, which now takes the war so quietly – possibly, indeed, in the opinion of superficial observers so apathetically – have got into the "jumpy" state in which they were before the relief of Ladysmith, and every day a new story that the beleaguered village has at last been relieved is started and accepted with pathetic eagerness. When the good news comes at last it seems at least probable that we shall witness a repetition of the outbreak of joy that greeted the succour of Sir George White and his brave comrades, and the idea that the calmness which now distinguishes the public has anything of callous indifference in it will be effectually dispelled. (June 1900, 1044–45)

The public Reid is defending against charges of apathy and "callous indifference" to the war takes on a different character when the news of Mafeking's relief finally arrives in London. Now, for Reid, the public has come to include him:

[T]o such a night – or rather such a night and day, for I write at the close of this memorable Saturday – none of us can recall a parallel. The news of the relief of Mafeking came unexpectedly in the end. For two days everybody had been inquiring almost hourly for the news so eagerly awaited. When it had not arrived by dinner time yesterday most of us prepared to wait with such patience as we could command for another night. And then, just as we were reconciling ourselves to the fact that the 18th of May was not to witness the realization of the promise made by Lord Roberts, the news came that the promise was most brilliantly fulfilled. (June 1900, 1046–47)

The “people” and the “public” have become “us” and “we” with the relief of Mafeking by the 18 May deadline set by the commander-in-chief. The resulting huge, leaderless crowd in central London is safe for the middle class, even includes the middle class. The idea of the jingo mob that has come down to us is a working-class, flag-waving, slogan-shouting crowd, and Reid confirms that in every respect but the most crucial:

It was in the thoroughfares of the West End . . . that the most wonderful sight was seen. Here the streets were blocked by a shouting, singing, cheering multitude, composed of both sexes and all classes – a multitude that seemed literally to have gone mad with joy . . . Every vehicle in the streets and a majority of the passers-by have borne [flags] – it was almost dangerous, indeed, to be seen without some emblem of the national joy. (June 1900, 1047–48)

A loud, boisterous multitude gone mad, but one that posed no threat to the middle class because it included “all classes.” This is, of course, a far cry from 1886 in Trafalgar Square; after all, this crowd is happy. Mafeking Night was an unruly gathering of a size unprecedented in London. For Reid, however, it is not a mob; it is “London.” And for the commentators in the daily papers, the crowd represented something larger still. The *Westminster Gazette* of 19 May declared, under a headline of “London Relieved!/The Empire’s Rejoicing/Fervid Cheers for Mafeking and ‘B.-P.,’” “That section of London which was not at home was delirious last night, and to-day is far on the way to proving the liveliest day ever experienced by the Capital. If for ‘London’ we read not merely ‘Country,’ but ‘Empire,’ the case is not put too high” (6). The enthusiasm of the British press at the relief of Mafeking is perhaps most concretely demonstrated by the first-ever use of an across-the-page headline by a London newspaper, by the *Daily Express* in its announcement of the end of the siege (Lake *British Newspapers* 111).

Tracing the implications of Mafeking Night illustrates changes in the concept of public opinion. Wemyss Reid blames the placard-producing

press for creating moods of despair or anticipation in the lead-up to Mafeking Night, but he does not in turn credit that press for the events of the night. The rather gullible public that he sees as manipulated by the popular press throughout the war suddenly disappears for Reid on Mafeking Night. The crowd becomes one with him in celebrating an event that transcends gender and class. Even this most virulent anti-tabloid press critic falls into the mood created by that very press when the mood represents “the national joy.”

How did Wemyss Reid and the rest of London (not to mention cities throughout the empire) get drawn into the melodrama of the siege of Mafeking? A siege makes for good long-term drama for a newspaper, almost as good as serial fiction for winning reader loyalty. It takes no great military mind to follow the details of a siege, and the situation itself – dwindling supplies and ammunition, no relief in sight – inspires concern. Mafeking was a more interesting siege than the other major Boer War sieges (Kimberley and Ladysmith) because of its isolated location, its last-minute relief, and its makeshift defending force. The tiny frontier town inspired concern in Britain from even before the start of the siege, so ripe was it for Boer picking. And the *Daily Mail*, through stories carried out of town by African runners, kept Mafeking in the news throughout the siege, updating readers on the occasional sorties from the town, the food stocks, and the mood of the garrison. The tactics of the *Daily Mail* captured the attention of the nation; the newspaper dramatized the situation of the town by emphasizing the danger that it might have to surrender and by stressing the inhabitants’ heroic good cheer and the ingenuity of the garrison’s leader, Baden-Powell.

“B.-P.”

Although the halfpennies led the way in dramatizing Mafeking’s plight, the qualities were not slow to pick up on the tactics of their lesser brethren. Press historian Stephen Koss cites *The Times* editors writing to their war correspondent Leo Amery, encouraging him to focus on individuals rather than on “abstract theories” (Koss *Rise and Fall* 419). The focus on personality came directly from the popular press: Moberly Bell wrote to Amery, “whatever your Harmsworths and Pearsons don’t know they do know the public” (quoted in Koss *Rise and Fall* 419). The Victorian cult of personality had moved into the press by the turn of the century, and the military version of the focus on individuals at the expense of issues, already in place by Gordon’s death,⁷ shifted into high

gear in the Boer War. In the early days of the war, the *Daily Mail* ran regular features on the officers it predicted would be important, including Baden-Powell.⁸ In his work on the empire, John MacKenzie connects military hero-worship to late-Victorian racial ideology, and we can trace that connection through an examination of the Boer War's biggest hero. MacKenzie notes that:

Concepts of race were closely related in popular literature to the imperative of conflict between cultures, and the evidence of superiority it provided. Colonial heroes became the prime exemplars of a master people, and this enhanced their position in the military cult of personality. Their fame enabled them to exert great influence in leading service and conscription associations and youth organisations, in travelling extensively on speaking visits to schools or in public lectures in civic halls, as well as participating in ceremonial throughout the country. (*Propaganda and Empire* 7)

Of course the foremost Victorian military figure to lead a youth organization was the founder of the Scouts. Throughout the siege of Mafeking, Baden-Powell had grown larger and larger in British public estimation, holding off the besiegers who so outnumbered his makeshift assembly of troops. "The Wolf That Does Not Sleep" managed to keep the town inhabitants alive with the scarce food available, mounted occasional sneak attacks on the besiegers, and performed in town entertainments designed to keep spirits up. He represented British pluck at its pluckiest. The creation of the public image of Baden-Powell was a group effort by the Victorian press, but it was solidified by the *Daily Mail* and its special Mafeking correspondent Lady Sarah Wilson.

At the start of the war, Lady Sarah, the athletic, adventurous sister of the late Lord Randolph Churchill and wife of a captain in the Royal Horse Guards who joined Baden-Powell's troops at Mafeking, had taken refuge at the farm of an English friend near Vryburg, down the rail line. Chafing at her inactivity, she sent by carrier pigeon to Baden-Powell with an offer to spy on the Boers; unfortunately, the Boers shot the pigeon down, discovered the offer, and imprisoned her at the farm. She decided to get to Mafeking, and, knowing that one of the *Daily Mail* reporters had been captured by the Boers and sent to Pretoria, she offered to serve as Mafeking correspondent for that paper. She managed to persuade her guards to take her to the general commanding the siege, who offered to exchange her for a Boer prisoner in Mafeking.⁹

Sarah Wilson's letters and telegrams to the *Daily Mail* from Mafeking focused on the everyday life of the siege – food shortages, boredom, details of the bombardment. But it was her descriptions of Baden-Powell

himself that the *Daily Mail* played up most. “The Two B.-P.’s/Sketched from Life by Lady Sarah Wilson” (20 April 1900, 4), for example, was a long article about the conditions of the siege, only the last third of which discussed Baden-Powell, despite its headline.

The detail about Baden-Powell provided by Lady Sarah supplemented the feature stories on his record that the *Daily Mail* had put together. In its leading articles, too, the paper located hopes for Mafeking, and indeed for the war, in Baden-Powell. On 24 March 1900, for example, the paper’s leader opined that:

The repulse – for such we fear it must be accounted – of Colonel Plumer’s column near Lobatsi, followed, as it has been, by a retreat to Crocodile Pools, would be an incident of infinitesimal importance in the great campaign now proceeding, were it not the case that upon it may hinge the fate of gallant little Mafeking. . . . The British public do not consider its surrender from the military standpoint. They remember the protracted, the heroic defence which the tiny garrison has made under that splendid officer Colonel Baden-Powell, and they hope and believe that the place will yet be snatched from its Boer besiegers at the eleventh hour.

It is strange to reflect how a man whose very name six months ago was almost unknown to the British public has now secured the confidence of the whole Empire, so that it firmly believes that no situation, however desperate, will prove too much for his resourcefulness and courage. But for our implicit trust in Colonel Baden-Powell, our hopes for Mafeking’s safety would be indeed feeble. . . . (“Devoted Mafeking” 4)

But it was the details provided by Sarah Wilson that gave the hero a personality for the readers. Lady Sarah had access to a Baden-Powell whom few other correspondents could have known; in her bomb-proof shelter she had a direct telephone to the colonel’s headquarters, and her sex and class standing meant that her quarters were the site of the most civilized of social gatherings of officers in Mafeking, including the 1899 Christmas dinner for Baden-Powell and his staff. Wilson’s description of “the two B.-P.’s” fed into the public’s growing sense of Baden-Powell as an extraordinary *person* as well as military leader:

At five o’clock we had a most successful concert, when really great talent was displayed, considering we are in a besieged town; but Colonel Baden-Powell on the stage is simply inimitable; in his quite extempore sketches he held the hall entranced or convulsed with laughter, and no one would have thought he had another idea in his mind beyond the nonsense he was talking. He certainly, by so thoroughly amusing them, put everyone on good terms with themselves.

A few hours afterwards there was an alarm of a night attack: firing suddenly commenced all round the town – a most unusual occurrence on a Sunday night, and the bullets rattled freely all over the roofs.

There was the same man, under a totally different aspect. One who was with him told me he could not help marveling at the change.

Quiet, composed, and far-seeing, in a second he had anticipated every contingency and laid his plans . . . (4)

Her praise of the Colonel's stage antics only serves as a contrast to highlight his composure and level-headedness as a military leader. Wilson does not actually describe what Baden-Powell does on stage – the point is how his sketches “put everyone on good terms with themselves,” that is, kept people from what he himself referred to as “grousing.”

MacKenzie's assertion that Victorian military hero-worship was connected to racial ideology is useful in an analysis of Baden-Powell's Mafeking publicity, but in a different way than MacKenzie would seem to suggest. Baden-Powell's superiority was not evidence of the “imperative of conflict between cultures” of black and white, since the Boer War was a war between white nations. His success was evidence of the superiority of the British over the Boer “race” rather than over Africans. But his public position as strategic genius did depend on his racial position in relation to Africans as well – Baden-Powell had to keep white people fed and relatively happy and keep loyal Africans alive on a very limited supply of food. Lady Sarah's articles as well as those of other siege correspondents had the ticklish job of portraying as humanitarian a leader who decreed an entirely unequal distribution of rations between whites and blacks that resulted in starvation of Africans while whites were still allotted meat to eat.

STARVING (THE) AFRICANS

We can see an example of the public image problem with which the *Daily Mail* was wrestling in the 10 April 1900 coverage of the Mafeking siege. The *Mail*'s efforts to create drama about Mafeking resulted in some fancy footwork. Headlines that day read “Lady Sarah Wilson Says ‘Failure Quite Possible’ . . . Famished Mafeking/Rumours about the Southern Relief Column/Plumer's Advance Causes No Relaxation/The Garrison Aware His Failure Is Possible,” and readers were invited to picture the worst fate for the gallant garrison. At the same time, the town had to be shown as doing its best: Lady Sarah's story pointed out that “Although the white population here is on a very restricted diet, every measure has been taken to alleviate distress, the numerous soup kitchens being able to feed all applicants” (5). Lady Sarah and the other

Daily Mail correspondent consistently discuss the food troubles of whites and blacks in Mafeking separately, making clear that the Africans were worse off. How would it be possible to show Baden-Powell as humanitarian and as a good provider for his besieged dependents, black and white, while making clear that white people were not being asked to waste away on the same rations as Africans were? Lady Sarah follows up her mention of the whites' "restricted diet" by saying, "No native need starve if he will but walk a short distance to the soup kitchen in his particular district." There is no mention in even the most dismal of the *Daily Mail* correspondents' Mafeking reports of the possibility of white people actually starving. The inference is that the garrison would be forced to surrender if Baden-Powell's loaves-and-fishes act gave out before help arrived. But Africans are often referred to in terms of starving: they are forced to try to escape from Mafeking to look for food, or they starve in Mafeking "needlessly," by refusing to eat horseflesh because it is against their custom.

Barolong inhabitants of Mafikeng, the "native stadt" included by Baden-Powell within the borders of Mafeking for purposes of the siege, were sold food along with whites and were allotted rations as well, once rationing began in March. But, as Sol Plaatje, then a court translator at Mafeking and later a founder of the South African Native National Congress, explains, food stores were closed to the refugee populations of Africans, "the blackish races of this continent – mostly Zulus and Zambesians," in February, and these populations had to make do on what they could scrounge until the establishment of the soup kitchens in April. The understanding was that the refugees would leave Mafeking and cease to be a drain on the town's stores, although Plaatje points out that many of them remained, begged, and starved (*Mafeking Diary* 124–25). Plaatje's version of the feeding of Africans during the siege is not nearly as critical as the versions in other books about the siege. *The Times* correspondent, Angus Hamilton, was scathing about British policy towards the Africans in the siege. He pointed out that Africans were driven by hunger out of Mafeking, trekking to the camp of Colonel Plumer, who had been stocked up to feed the refugees: "The natives here, who are already so reduced that they are dying from sheer inanition, having successfully accomplished the journey, which is one of ninety miles, may feed to their hearts' content – provided that they are able to pay for the rations which are so generously distributed to them" (*Siege* 249). Hamilton criticized Baden-Powell as well, for charging Africans for the horsemeat soup served out in the Mafeking soup kitchens.

“[T]here can be no doubt that the drastic principles of economy which Colonel Baden-Powell has been practicing in these later days are opposed to and altogether at variance with the dignity of the liberalism which we profess,” (249) he wrote on 3 March in the diary he later published as *The Siege of Mafeking*. Edward Ross, a Mafeking resident whose siege diary was published by Brian Willan in 1980, recorded on 9 March that “[t]he lower class of natives are beginning to suffer the pangs of starvation very severely,” then on 10 March, “It does seem rather hard that we can go and buy food-stuffs whilst the natives are in such straits (sic) to keep body and soul together” (*Diary* 179). The residents of Mafeking, in their reply to Baden-Powell’s report on the siege submitted in March of 1902, noted among their complaints that Baden-Powell’s Commissariat Department made “sales at a profit to starving natives” (241). Even B.-P.’s defenders, such as *Pall Mall Gazette* correspondent J. Emerson Neilly, described in detail the “black spectres and living skeletons” (*Besieged* 227) that the Africans had become by March – those who were still alive. “Probably hundreds died from starvation or the diseases that always accompany famine,” wrote Neilly (*Besieged with B.-P.* 227). But he complained about “grousing” critics in the town who would “have the Colonel kill our very few ill-fed beeves and give them to the blacks and allow them to have a daily share of the white rations.” If such a policy had been carried out, declared Neilly, “we would either have died of starvation in the works [the fortifications] or surrendered and been marched as prisoners of war to Pretoria” (*Besieged* 231). Clearly the “we” in his analysis meant the white inhabitants of Mafeking.

The very thought of the white inhabitants of Mafeking being marched to Pretoria was enough to chill the blood, Neilly assumes. And, indeed, it was just that spectacle that Baden-Powell was working so hard to prevent. To that end, he exploited the African population of Mafeking in different ways throughout the siege. He employed Africans extensively in building the defense works for the town and, with his famous “Cape Boys” and “Black Watch,” as troops as well. Baden-Powell was quite judicious in his use of news about Africans in his accounts of the siege. For example, the *Westminster Gazette* of 3 May 1900, under the headline “Incidents at Mafeking/Cheerful Report from Baden-Powell,” included a Baden-Powell despatch:

Party of thirteen native women tried to get away on night of 15th. Enemy opened fire on them; killed nine, wounded two, who got back and reported. I wrote to Snyman pointing out that he shelled native stadt, which is full of

women and children; and that when they were trying to escape from Mafeking by day Boers flogged and sent them back, and that they by night shot them down, pretending to mistake them for night attacks. He has not replied, proportion of killed and wounded above speaking for itself. (7)

This despatch comes from the man whose policy was to starve Africans into escaping from Mafeking through the Boer lines.

Mentions of Africans in Mafeking despatches and news stories fall into two categories, the first of which is exemplified by Baden-Powell's despatch: blame African hardships on the Boers (even Sol Plaatje blames African refugee starvation on the Boers rather than on Baden-Powell). This reinforces British notions of Boer inhumanity toward Africans, the pro-war argument of the "negrophilists." The other category into which mentions of Africans fall is praise of the loyalty of the Cape Boys and the Black Watch, the Africans who fought in defense of the town. But this category was played up more by the war correspondents than by Baden-Powell, who consistently denied credit to the fighting Africans in his efforts to keep public perception of the war as a "white man's war." Africans as loyal subjects of the Queen and Africans as victims of the cruel Boers – these were the possibilities in British public versions of the siege. Brian Willan points out that Baden-Powell prevented the town newspaper from printing the true account of the role of the Barolong in fending off the final assault of the Boers (*Sol Plaatje* 89). Not until the publication of Plaatje's diary in 1973 did a version of the siege emerge in which Africans were portrayed as economic and social beings with families, homes, and relationships, money troubles, and job concerns.

Baden-Powell survived the public relations problems inherent in his situation to become the symbol not only for Mafeking but for British pluck in general and for the war effort as a whole. Headline writers of all kinds of papers could count on their readers knowing who "B.-P." was (after the siege, Baden-Powell told of a letter addressed simply to "B.-P." that was delivered to him by the Royal Mail). And the celebrations of the relief, as the *Illustrated London News* made clear, were celebrations of Baden-Powell:

[T]he heart of the public manifestly went out to the extraordinarily skilful and resourceful commander, who for seven long and anxious months held Mafeking against the Boer besiegers. "B.-P." richly deserved every word of praise bestowed upon him . . . Colonel Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell's gallant defense of Mafeking won for him the warmest admiration of the Queen and the whole Empire. He has worked nobly, and eminently deserves promo-