

Shula Marks

**Before ‘the white man was master and
all white men’s values prevailed’?**

Jan Smuts, race and the South African war

SADOCC

STUDIEN ZUM SÜDLICHEN AFRIKA 6

Shula Marks

Before ‘the white man was master and all white men’s values prevailed’? Jan Smuts, race and the South African war

Lecture given on the invitation of the Institute of Economic and Social History and the Institute of Africanistic Studies, both at University of Vienna, and of the Southern Africa Documentation and Co-operation Centre (SADOCC) on 24th October 2000 in Vienna.

Shula Marks is Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University. The final version of this paper was delivered on 2nd November 2000 as the Raleigh Lecture, at the British Academy.

Production: Elfriede Pekny

© Wien 2000

Southern Africa Documentation and Cooperation Centre (SADOCC)

A-1061 Vienna, P.O.Box 146

e-mail: office@sadocc.at

<http://www.sadocc.at>

ISBN: 3-901446-06-0

Before ‘the white man was master and all white men’s values prevailed’?¹

Jan Smuts, race and the South African war

By Shula Marks

Many of you who know my previous work may find it strange to find me talking about Smuts this morning; indeed I feel the same way myself. My choice of topic perhaps needs a word of explanation. The simplest is that I was asked to write an entry on Smuts for the new Dictionary of National Biography being edited for Oxford University Press by the late Colin Mathews. Having imagined that I could toss something off in a couple of weeks, especially as I had recently written a paper with Saul Dubow on the South African writings of the eminent Australian historian, and my predecessor as Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Keith Hancock² - including his magisterial two-volume biography of Smuts on which I shall draw in what follows - I found this obligation ate up my entire summer. My reluctance to waste so much investment of time and energy is part but not the whole of the explanation for my lecture topic today.

Like Hancock himself, I approach the subject of biography with some diffidence: not because I believe that biography is some lesser branch of historical scholarship, but because like him I am sensitive to the charge

that biography almost inevitably exaggerates the role of individuals and frequently fails to address the structural determinants of social change. Nevertheless like Hancock I think there is a case to be made - against Collingwood on the one hand and certain Marxist critics and social historians on the other - for the study of individuals in their times as a way of integrating individual human agency within a larger social context: indeed my own work on The Ambiguities of Dependence and Not Either an Experimental Doll were forays of a kind into the use of life story if not full-blown biography for precisely these purposes.

Of course in these works I was not concerned with the biography of those whom Hancock terms ‘outstanding individuals’; and it is clear that he did not consider, in his ruminations on the nature and problem of biography, the nature of the biographers’ investment in their subject. Indeed, so close was Hancock’s identification of himself in Smuts, that his work reads at times as a form of autobiography. Whether Hancock consciously saw it in such terms or not, his two volumes on Smuts can be read as the ac-

count of one great (white) man by another.³ Thus in the second volume of his own autobiography, entitled Professing History, Hancock wrote quite explicitly of his emotional involvement with Smuts:

... my biography reaches the last chapter as a still-continuing debate in which Smuts appears not only as he saw himself and as his friends saw him, but also as his enemies saw him. This does not mean that I have concealed my love for him. I have shared his life of thought and action as he lived it from boyhood to old age. I have shared it year by year, month by month, week by week and in time of crisis day by day. He had grown up speaking in his home a different language from mine, and I was only two years old when he rode out on commando; but the affinity, almost the identity, between his upbringing in the Swartland and mine in Gippsland has made it easy for me to come close to him. Today, I still come close to him in his effort of thought on the crucial issues which now confront our species....⁴

Never having felt any great affinity with Smuts, my angle of vision is rather different. And while it can be argued that one of the main motivations for Hancock in taking on the Smuts biography at the behest of the Syndics of Cambridge University press (Smuts had been Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, remember) because of the prestige and reflected glory the project offered, to take on the potted biography of 'a great white man'

fifty years after his death is today decidedly unfashionable. Nevertheless, as I began to work on Smuts as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of his death, in the context of a South Africa which would have been beyond his comprehension, I felt increasingly that his biography opened up questions around race and gender that have come to preoccupy me over the past few years which deserved exploration. Rereading Hancock and the other biographies of Smuts in the context of a more sophisticated literature on race and gender, makes him perhaps more of a riddle than he has seemed before.

Having started out believing that I knew what I wanted to say about Smuts, and could do so quite briefly, I ended up recognising that in fact he was a far more complex and contradictory character than I had been willing to concede, and that - despite Hancock - there was still much that could be said about a man who was not only widely recognised as an exceptional scholar, soldier and scientist but was also probably South Africa's most outstanding white statesman in the twentieth century, the equivalent in terms of international stature in the first half of the twentieth century of Mandela in our own time.

Here the briefest of thumbnail sketches must suffice, although it is difficult to be brief for Smuts's life covers many of the major themes in South African, European and Commonwealth history in the first half of this century. Born in 1870 amid the magnificent

mountains of the south western Cape where his forebears had farmed since the 18th century, Jan Christiaan Smuts entered school at the age of twelve and rapidly revealed his remarkable intellect. His academic interests as a university student included botany, English and German poetry, and Greek, as well as politics and philosophy. A scholarship took him to Cambridge where in 1894 he was the first candidate to achieve a distinction in both parts of the law tripos. The famous British jurist to be the most outstanding student he had ever taught. On his return to South Africa the following year, he soon became caught up in the confrontation between Britain and the South African Republic which culminated in the South African war. As Attorney General in President Kruger's Transvaal he played a prominent part in the negotiations before the war and framed the Republic's political and military strategy. After the capture of Pretoria in 1900, he joined the Boer commandos, leading his own troops on a thousand-mile odyssey into the Cape colony in the following year. For a man who had a reputation for being frail as a child and who was so deeply steeped in book-learning, Smuts showed a remarkable aptitude for war. Cool and courageous, he was a fine tactician and, despite his personal aloofness, an inspiring leader of men. He emerged from the war, physically robust, with added authority among Afrikaners and a fearsome reputation among the British as their indomitable foe. He displayed his military and strategic skills again in World

War I when he put down civil war in South Africa, helped capture South West Africa from the Germans and led the imperial troops in East Africa. It was during war that Smuts discovered himself and his manhood. According to his long time associate and admirer, the journalist Peter Beukes, to Smuts, 'not race or nationality, not learning or beliefs mattered, but manhood. Being a man, a whole man with all that implies in courage and character, dignity and freedom to follow his own inner conviction, was to him the epitome of all existence.' Towards the end of his life, Smuts is said to have remarked to W.S. Morrison at the unveiling of his statue by Jacob Epstein in Parliament Square 'Morrison, it is a great thing to be a man - a great thing.'¹⁵

There can be little doubt, however that - contrary to Beukes - for Smuts being a man meant being a white man, for as many recent writers on whiteness have recently reminded us, the most salient feature of whiteness is its invisibility. As Ruth Frankenberg has pointed out in a totally different context, whiteness, for all that it is an 'unmarked cultural category', generates 'norms, ways of understanding history, ways of thinking about self and other, and ... ways of thinking about culture ... [but it] needs to be examined and historicized.'¹⁶ Manhood, like womanhood, has its social markers.

For Smuts then being a white man involved decisiveness, if not ruthlessness and the preparedness to defend what he considered important to the death of need be. The

white man as 'hero' in the Ruskin mould, above all it gave him agency. In what seem to me to be complex ways, Smuts's masculinity underpinned his paternalist racial beliefs, his warmongering tactics, the high intellectual remoteness of 'holism' and his love of solitary contemplation on the tops of mountains.

Smuts, however, also thought of himself as a man of peace and a lawgiver. In May 1902, convinced that the alternative spelt the total destruction of the Afrikaner people, Smuts persuaded the Boer commanders to lay down their arms, and sign the peace treaty with the British which he had largely drafted with his fellow lawyer and future rival, General G.B.M. Hertzog. Thereafter he played a major role in Transvaal politics securing its self-government from Britain in 1906. Four years later, espousing a policy of 'reconciliation' between Briton and Boer, he was the architect of the Union of South Africa. Both at Vereeniging and again in 1910 his intervention was crucial in ensuring that the issue of a non-racial franchise was not on the agenda.

In both the Transvaal and in the Union, he held several crucial ministerial post under the premiership of his long-time comrade in arms and confidant, Louis Botha, establishing the Union's legislative and constitutional framework. As Minister of Mines in 1911 he was in charge of the 1911 Mines and Works Act which introduced sub rosa the colour bar in the mining industry; and his was not one of the voices raised against the Natives Land Act in

1913. Nevertheless, it was not until 1919 when he succeeded Botha as PM and Minister of Native Affairs that he gave his attention to 'native affairs' per se - in his pushing through the 1920 Native Affairs Act and the 1923 Urban Areas Act, both of which pushed forward segregationist legislation, under a paternalist guise.

If, in the first forty years of his life, Smuts was an Afrikaner nationalist (albeit of the old Cape Afrikaner Bond variety), in the forty years after Union he preached a broader white South African nationalism; and white trusteeship and segregation played a major role in cementing this white alliance. 'Colonial poacher turned imperial gamekeeper' (in Tony Stockwell's words), he also helped refashion the modern British Commonwealth, establishing the notion of Dominion status during and immediately after World War I, and assisting in the birth of the independent Irish state in 1921. Nor was his internationalism restricted to the British Commonwealth; as a member of the British war cabinet, he helped draft Britain's peace terms after World War I and was present at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where he represented South Africa together with Botha. There he argued in vain for a magnanimous peace and opposed the punitive reparations imposed on Germany, recognising the threat they posed to world peace.⁷ In 1918-9, he was responsible for establishing the framework of the League of Nations and the mandate system, while in 1945-6 he participated in the discus-

sions that set up the United Nations Organisation, and both suggested and drafted its human rights charter.

Nor did he ever forget his scholarly activities; during the South African war he carried a copy of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and the New Testament in the original Greek in his knapsack. Between 1906 and 1911 in the midst of his multiple ministerial responsibilities he wrote a philosophical treatise, 'An enquiry into the whole' which was based in part on the MSS on Walt Whitman which he wrote as a law student in Cambridge, and which in turn formed the basis of his Holism and Evolution published in 1926, in which he attempted to synthesize Darwinian science and metaphysics. Highly regarded at the time, it attracts few admirers today; nevertheless it paved the way for Smuts's presidency of the prestigious British Association for the Advancement of Science in its centenary year in 1931. By this time he was widely acclaimed for capacity to synthesise knowledge across a range of scientific disciplines. He was also as Saul Dubow has noted 'one of the most articulate and persuasive champions of South African science and, especially, its role in the creation of nationhood.'⁸

Smuts may have hoped to use science to promote a white South African nation, but his domestic political life in the interwar years was far from successful. Having succeeded Botha as Prime Minister in 1919, he was soon outflanked by the more extreme nationalism of Hertzog's Afrikaner National Party, and

forced into an alliance with the party of mining capital with which he had become increasingly close during the war years. He was ousted from power in 1924, having achieved an unenviable reputation within South Africa for his high-handed ruthlessness in suppressing black millenarians at Bulhoek in the eastern Cape in 1921, and white mineworkers on strike on the Rand and the Bondelswartz people in Namibia the following year. Chafing in opposition, in 1933 he accepted office under Hertzog, despite the considerable differences between them especially in relation to Britain and the Commonwealth connection. Smuts's hour came again with the outbreak of World War II when he persuaded parliament on a majority of 13 votes to join Britain in the struggle against Nazism. Hertzog resigned and Smuts became Prime Minister.

Despite his age, he rapidly built up the Union's defence forces, oversaw the despatch of South African troops to North Africa and the Middle East, visited the front on several occasions, and frequently advised Churchill on war strategy.

Whatever his wartime achievements, in 1948 Smuts lost the all-white South African elections to the revamped forces of Afrikaner nationalism under the slogan of apartheid. The election results came as a shock to Smuts, who had been confident of victory. Not only had he underestimated the capacity of the Afrikaner nationalists; he had also failed to take the most elementary political

precautions, by refusing to alter, while he had a parliamentary majority, the rules of delimitation which in their existing form greatly favoured rural constituencies. On the basis of one vote one value Smuts would have won a majority of some twenty seats.⁹ He died two years later; and, as we all know, the Nationalists remained in power until 1994.

For all his achievements, Smuts remains a curiously elusive if not evasive figure, as his frequent soubriquet, 'slim (crafty) Jannie' suggests. Widely revered in his own time especially in Britain and the Commonwealth, in South Africa in his lifetime, Smuts was reviled by Afrikaner nationalists as the 'handyman of empire', and by South Africa's white workers as a 'lackey of capitalism'; in the apartheid era he was largely forgotten. Outside South Africa, since his death, his overt belief in white supremacy and refusal to accept South Africa's majority black population as fellow-citizens greatly tarnished his image. To a post-imperial generation, the speeches and writings which struck his contemporaries as profound frequently appear overblown or even banal, while his philosophy of holism seems less than persuasive. In 1966, A.J.P. Taylor concluded a critical review of the first four volumes of Smuts's papers, by asking in typical acerbic fashion, 'Was Smuts a citizen of Vanity Fair or the Kingdom of Heaven? Straining charity very far, one might say he had a foot in both camps. At any rate he was a master at making commonplaces look like wisdom.'¹⁰ Apart from Hancock's magisterial

biography published in the 1960s, a lacklustre sequel by Kenneth Ingham in 1986 and a clutch of dissertations in Afrikaans, Smuts has been relatively neglected by historians since death. In the late 1990s, as white South Africans once more face the wider world, however, and with the growing interest among scholars in colonial nationalism, white identity and the history of science, this extraordinarily complex and multi-faceted individual is attracting renewed attention.¹¹

My own focus at least in this paper is somewhat different. Here I am concerned to look at an aspect of Smuts's life which perhaps somewhat surprisingly seems to me to have escaped his previous biographers: the powerful role which racial fears played in his thought and the way in which these were tempered by the influence of powerful radical and feminist women on his political consciousness. The conjunction I believe goes far to explain his evasiveness on matters of race in the interwar years.

Smuts's equivocal attitude on questions of race has of course frequently been noted, although it is generally discussed in terms of what is generally termed 'native policy', which is where Hancock deals with it - but he places little emphasis on this aspect of Smuts's life. In a telling phrase, he entitled - without irony - his chapter on Smuts's Indian and 'native policy' 'The Stranger within the Gate' - for Hancock it was the indigenous African majority not the settler Smuts who was the stranger - while he is silent over the racist passages in

many of Smuts's speeches and writings and passes over what I can only term the racist eruptions in many of Smuts's speeches and writings in silence.

In our paper on Hancock and South Africa, Saul Dubow and I remarked that 'it is a matter of conspicuous irony that Hancock shared Smuts's blindness towards matters of race and the aspirations of African nationalism in particular. Both men were abstractly aware that the 'native problem' was the most pressing issue in South Africa but neither had any real understanding of its nature or force.¹² Just as Smuts devoted most of his domestic political energies to maintaining unity between Boer and Briton while prevaricating on the question of colour, so Hancock's appreciated that race was the most intractable political issue in South Africa but displayed little interest in the issue and no originality in its analysis - except as it impinged on white South Africa and its place in the Commonwealth.¹³

I would now wish to modify this statement. It seems to me that if there was a certain 'blindness; or 'opacity; on race questions in the two men it proceeded from different psychological sources, different identifications as white men. Despite its deep imbrication in European imperialism and settler colonialism, 'Whiteness' in Australia or Britain was not the same as whiteness in South Africa.

In Hancock, the Australian, then, this blindness arose because he was temperamentally disposed to think of South Africa - and almost

believed it to be - like *his* Australia a 'white man's country'.¹⁴ Writing at a time when as C.E. Carrington put it, 'the white man was master and all white men's values prevailed', his was a failure of imagination and an easy over-identification with settler South Africa. As we shall see, white racial dominion was by no means as assured in South Africa at the turn of the last century.

In Smuts, as I shall argue, the silences derive from a far more active process of repressed fear and major contradictions between his identity as a white South African man, and his self perception as a liberal and citizen of the world. His closest friends were undoubtedly liberal in not radical feminists and passivist like Olive Schreiner, Emily Hobhouse, and the Quaker sisters, Margaret Gillett and Alice Clarke, with whom he spent every spare moment during his sojourns in London both in 1905-6 and during the war and with whom he corresponded regularly throughout his life. His political philosophy and understanding of, if not entrée into European politics was I believe profoundly influenced by these women, although this is rarely acknowledged.

Sarah Gertrude Millin, the novelist whose early biography of Smuts was based on extensive interviews with her subject in the 1930s, captured the contradictions well when she pointed to the contrast between Smuts's philosophy of holism, 'the very essence' of which was freedom, and his attitudes to issues of colour: by going against the principle

of freedom, she maintained, he did 'violence to his deepest principle, he hurts his faith, he hurts himself There is also his Cape tradition. There is also his consciousness and colouring of world thought. It is a battle without end between his spirit and the day's compulsions - a lasting battle for his spirit.'¹⁵

It is this which I believe may partly explains a conundrum posed by a pseudonymous newspaper correspondent, Gallio, who wrote in January 1929:

*The fact is that no one in politics has any effective conception of how to combine all the diverse populations of South Africa into a single unity, nor even whether such a combination should be sought. General Smuts must have some systematic ideas on the subject because he is a philosopher. But his ideas do not find any place in his programme. On the all important colour question he has never risen above the merest opportunism. He has been fighting the party dog-fight so long, and willy-nilly is using the weapons of his opponents, that he seems to have sought refuge in a complete divorce of politics and philosophy within his mind. The result is that when he enters the political field, he leaves behind him the chief part of what differentiates him from his mole-like fellow -creatures. This third-class performance by a first-class mind is a curious and, from a public standpoint, distressing thing. Some say, 'In this unholy battle Smuts grows base.' But the truth is that the real Smuts is not there. He has retired from politics.*¹⁶

In similar vein in 1975 Bernard Friedman, former member of parliament for Smuts's United Party and a founder of the South African Progressive Party, took Hancock to task for helping - as he put it - to 'sustain the legend of Smuts as the great Commonwealth statesman whose commanding stature in world affairs gave South Africa the prestige, if not the status, of a world power.'¹⁷ According to Friedman, this legacy obscured Smuts's manifest failure to intervene with vision and leadership in South Africa when faced with suitable opportunities during his fifty year career. 'As far as he was concerned, the Native Question was not a problem to be solved but an embarrassment to be shelved' wrote Friedman. 'In the field of Native affairs he was content to practise a cautious pragmatism, meeting emergent situations with temporising expedients.'¹⁸ Liberalism was in principle a fine doctrine; in practice it was 'for Whites only'.¹⁹ As Smuts wrote in March 1906 to John X. Merriman, soon to be Prime Minister of the Cape:

I am entirely with you on the Native Question. I sympathize profoundly with the Native races of South Africa whose land it was long before we came here to force a policy of dispossession on them. An it ought to be the policy of all parties to do justice to the Natives and to take all wise and prudent measures for their civilization and improvement. But I don't believe in politics for them. Perhaps at bottom I do not believe in politics at all as

*a means for the attainment of the highest ends; but certainly so far as the Natives are concerned, politics will ... only have an unsettling influence When I consider the political future of the Natives in South Africa I must say that I look into shadows and darkness; and then I feel inclined to shift the intolerable burden of solving that sphinx problem to the ampler shoulders and stronger brains of the future ...*²⁰

More recently, the historian Kenneth Ingham has argued that with Smuts, 'logic went overboard when the native question was under discussion. Human considerations pushed him in one direction, instinct in another.'²¹ Clearly, Smuts's blinkered vision is not news. In general it has been ascribed by his biographers - like Ingham²² - to 'instinct' and the natural proclivities of the Afrikaner - whatever that means; or to the general temper of the times - racism was, after all, the common sense in contemporary Europe and America let alone in South Africa; or to Smuts's political opportunism and the exigencies of white politics in the Transvaal and later South Africa where - it is alleged - no politician could have carried the white, let alone the Afrikaner, population on even the limited Cape liberal policy of 'equal rights for all civilized men'; or to his preoccupations with Europe. It would, of course, be foolish to deny all these arguments. Some at least contain an element of truth. Nevertheless, they either block further explanation by taking as given that which needs to be explained or they underplay the

intensity of Smuts's racism and its centrality not simply to what was conventionally entitled 'native policy' in which he was frequently said to have no real interest, but far more widely to the whole range of his policies: his support for Rhodes in 1895; his preparedness to make peace in 1902; his attitudes to 'reconciliation' between the 'white races' and the need for unification of the South African colonies in 1910; his ruthlessness in crushing strikes by white workers especially in 1914 and 1922; his acceptance of South Africa's position in the British Commonwealth; his refusal to bow to India's demands on behalf of its rightless citizens in South Africa; his equivocations on 'native policy' in the 1930s when he entered Hertzog's cabinet in the new United Party; and his failure to support his liberal lieutenant, Hofmeyr, when he resigned from the cabinet and was then pushed out of the party caucus, on both occasions for matters of principle relating to the race issue. There is, alas, no time here to elaborate on these arguments - though in each instance Smuts himself acknowledged the centrality of race.

I think one can go further. I myself believe that Smuts's inchoate ideas on black-white relations in South Africa - and where they were not banal they were remarkably inchoate for one so coolly intellectual and analytical - all derived wholly or in large measure from his obsession with the fragility of what he saw as white 'civilization' at the tip of a hostile continent. In a recent comment, Saul Dubow has remarked, 'only by taking the intellectual

discourse of scientific racism seriously is it possible to fully comprehend its strength and appeal'.²³ But there is no evidence that Smuts was really concerned with the 'intellectual discourse of scientific racism', despite the references in his lecture to the British Association for the Advancement of Science to 'primitive child races', 'Nordic' and 'Negro' 'types'. Indeed, what is striking is the way in which this highly intellectual man, who had his finger on the pulse of scientific advance in the first half of the twentieth century did NOT make use of the contemporary scientific arguments about racial difference. On the contrary what seems to me evident is the tremendous contrast between Smuts's almost visceral fear of Africans and his optimistic scientific vision.

This was already evident in his political debut in 1895 when he went to Kimberley on behalf of the Afrikaner Bond to defend Rhodes against his detractors:

*At the southern corner of a vast continent, peopled by over 10,000,000 barbarians, about half a million whites have taken up a position, with a view not only to working out their own destiny, but also of using that position as a basis for lifting up and opening up that vast dead-weight of immemorial barbarism and animal savagery to the light and blessing of ordered civilisation. Unless the white race closes its ranks in this country, its position will soon become untenable in the face of that overwhelming majority of prolific barbarism.*²⁴

If much of this can be ascribed to Smuts's childhood experiences as the son of a land-owner on a farm in the western Cape - about which we know remarkably little in fact - I believe the really formative event was the South African war, an event which was deeply etched on Smuts's consciousness, and which made it almost impossible for him to transcend these earlier experiences. The profound meaning of the war can, I think, be seen in the emotionally charged letter which Smuts wrote to the British journalist W.T. Stead in the closing months of the South African war. In it he bitterly castigated Britain's 'baneful policy' of employing 'Natives and Coloured people as armed combatants not in small insignificant numbers, but in thousands' Armed by the British, he continued, 'these ... fiends' had 'committed horrible atrocities on fugitive or peaceful women and children ... the world will be surprised to find that almost as many women and children have perished at the hands of barbarians in this war, by the connivance or general instigation of British officers, as were done to death by Dingaan and Moselekatze at the dawn of the Republics in South Africa...'²⁵

It is difficult to capture the almost paranoid language used by Smuts in this outburst in a short extract. For several passionate pages he pronounced on how shocking it was 'to employ armed barbarians under white officers in a war between two white Christian peoples,' both in view of the 'numerical disproportion of the two peoples engaged in this struggle' and

‘from the point of view of South African history and public policy.’ Far worse than the actual war or the concentration camps, Smuts maintained, what really endangered ‘the continued existence of the white community as the ruling class in South Africa’, was the involvement, by Britain, of the ‘coloured races’ in a dispute between whites, thus allowing them to ‘become the arbiter in disputes between ... [them] and in the long run the predo-minating factor or “casting vote” in SA.’

Dark indeed is that shadow! [he proclaimed] When armed Natives and Coloured boys, trained and commanded by English officers, tread the soil of the Republics in pursuit of the fugitive Boer and try to pay off old scores by insulting his wife and children on their farms; when the Boer women in the Cape Colony have to cook for and serve the brutal Coloured scouts, who roam about the lonely farms of the veld, and are forced to listen to their filthy talk; when they hear these Coloured soldiers of the King boast that after the war the latter will be the owners of the farms of the rebellious Boers and will marry the widows of the heroes who have gone to rest; when, to escape violation and nameless insults at the hands of their former servants, now wearing the British uniform, Boer women and girls seek refuge in the mountains of the native land, as I have seen them do - a wound is given to South Africa which Time itself will not heal.

As a result, British war policy portended ‘an eventual débâcle of society’ in which the white population would ‘have to bow before a Native constabulary and soldiery’. This ‘Frankenstein Monster which ... will, as it necessarily must, get out of control’ was, he asserted, far worse than ‘the utter desolation of South Africa and the unprecedented sufferings of the whole Boer people in field and prison camps’.

For Smuts, the student of Shakespeare and Shelley, Walt Whitman and Goethe, it

*would soon cause South Africa to relapse into barbarism the interests of self-preservation no less than the cause of civilisation in South Africa demand imperatively that blacks shall not be called in or mixed up with quarrels between the whites.*²⁶

Initially I was inclined to dismiss this letter as propaganda premised on paranoia; there is no evidence that white women were raped or even molested by ‘the coloured races’ on any scale, despite a lurid article in the German press in 1900 after the attack by the Kgatla on Derdepoort, although there was undoubtedly a good deal of taunting of masters and especially mistresses by former labourers.²⁷ Looking at the evidence I was forcefully reminded of Norman Etherington’s acerbic comment on the so-called ‘black peril’ scare in Natal in 1870 - ‘during the rape crisis everyone was scared and practically no-one was raped’. One cannot, however, leave the matter there. As Etherington continues:

fear of losing control was a constant undercurrent in the thinking of the settler minority. This substratum of anxiety rose to the surface in the form of a moral panic whenever disturbances in the economy or the body politic were severe enough to unsettle the mask of composure worn by the face of public authority. In a patriarchal society, where women were part and parcel of the property to be defended against threats from below, fear of rape was a special concern of white males. ²⁸

Turn of the century South Africa was undoubtedly undergoing one of its recurrent 'crises of control', provoked in this instance as much by the conflict between Boer and Briton as between black and white; and fears of the effect the war would have on 'the native mind' were rampant. As so often, anxieties about sexual subversion mirrored apprehensions of political disintegration and loss of property and led to a redefining of racial and gender boundaries.²⁹ This apocalypse lay behind Smuts's conviction that the future of the Afrikaner people was at stake and that peace was essential if they were to survive.

Behind his fears there was a harsh reality: rural destruction and the suffering and mortality of women and children in the concentration camps had dire demographic implications, while the Boer commandos were increasingly demoralised. However determined the generals, their support was dwindling, while they were also losing control over black people in the countryside.

Recent monographs - by Peter Warwick and Bill Nasson, and more recently a handful of case studies in particular arenas of the war - have shown that black people undoubtedly participated in the war. They were employed by the British during the South African war, and the Afrikaner commandos also made use of their black labourers as agterryers or retainers. As Franzjohan Pretorius has pointed out in his work on the South African war, the 12,000 African retainers who accompanied the Boer commandoes - whether willingly or unwillingly - constituted 20 per cent of their manpower, and this released an equivalent number of Afrikaner soldiers for armed combat. Nor, however, was assistance to the armed forces all. In many areas, Africans and Coloureds took the opportunity of the 'white man's war' to wage their own struggle against their landowners and overlords, whether by collaborating with the imperial forces, raiding Boer farms on their own account or taking their erstwhile masters to court.³⁰

Much of Smuts's letter to Stead was probably based on rumour and hearsay, as terrified settlers projected many of their fears onto an African population whom they had earlier expropriated and exploited, and whose women they had raped and assaulted. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that Smuts served in the two arenas of war which probably saw the greatest involvement of armed black troops: the western Transvaal and the northern Cape. When he arrived to join de la Rey's commando in the Pilansberg area in late 1900, for

example, he found most of the farms deserted by whites. Most had fled after the battle of Derdepoort when armed Kgatla had attacked a Boer commando and killed 56 of its 70 members.³¹ Raid and counterraid followed and in the last years of the war the Kgatla retook the land that had been taken from them in the previous forty years and controlled the entire Marico-Rustenburg region. In the northern Cape, too, where Smuts spent the last months of the war, the British had handed over the defence to armed Coloured and black contingents of the entire area between the Cape Town Kimberley railway and the Atlantic; the sparsely settled white population was clearly both anxious and sorepressed.

Undoubtedly during the war Smuts felt his entire social world beginning to crack, and this apocalyptic vision was to haunt him for most of the rest of his life. At the end of the letter which Smuts wrote to Stead and which I have already quoted so extensively, Smuts remarked,

*The war between the white races will run its course and pass away and may, if followed by a statesmanlike settlement, one day only be remembered as a great thunderstorm, which purified the atmosphere of the sub-continent. But the native question will never pass away; it will become more difficult as time goes on, and the day may come when the evils and horrors of this war will appear as nothing in comparison with its after effects produced on the Native mind.*³²

In the event it was the after-effects produced on Smuts's mind which was perhaps of greater moment. Quite how deeply these racial fears aroused during the South African war were embedded in Smuts memory can be seen also in his reactions to the use of black troops in the East African campaigns. Thus in June 1917, when he had already - uniquely - been coopted to the British war cabinet, recruited after the departure of his Commonwealth colleagues because of his impressive performance on the imperial war cabinet, an article in the Daily Mail asked:

*'Why is General Smuts anxious about the future of Equatorial Africa? BECAUSE THE WAR HAS BROUGHT THE SUR-PRISING REVELATION THAT THE AFRICAN NEGROES CAN BE TRANS-FORMED INTO SOME OF THE FINEST FIGHTING MATERIAL IN THE WORLD by means of naval bases on both sides of Africa [the Germans] will command the sea routes to the East and to Australasia AND THEIR MAIN INSTRUMENTS WILL BE HORDES OF BLACK TROOPS TRAINED AND EQUIPPED IN TROPICAL AFRICA.'*³³

Footnotes

- ¹ C.E. Carrington, The Liquidation of the British Empire (London, 1966) p.66.
- ² Saul Dubow and Shula Marks, 'Patriotism of race and place: Keith Hancock and South Africa', in D.A. Low, Inquiry and Narration. Keith Hancock and Historical Studies (Melbourne University Press, forthcoming)
- ³ W.K.Hancock, Smuts. I. The Sanguine Years. 1870-1919 (Cambridge 1962) and Smuts. II. The Fields of Force 1919-1950 (Cambridge, 1968).
- ⁴ Professing History (Sidney, 1976) pp. 62-3.
- ⁵ P Beukes, The Holistic Smuts. A study in personality (Human and Rousseau, Cape Town and Pretoria, 1990), p.81
- ⁶ Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters. The social construction of whiteness (Minnesota, 1997), p.231. Frankenberg is writing about the racialized identity of white women in contemporary California; nevertheless, I found her carefully nuanced study extremely useful in thinking about white identity in the South Africa.
- ⁷ Smuts to Lloyd George, 26 Mar 1919, Selections from the Smuts Papers, IV, ed. by K.Hancock and Jean van der Poel (Cambridge, 1966) p. 84. (henceforth Smust Papers).
- ⁸ Saul Dubow, 'Commonwealth of Knowledge: the British Association in South Africa, 1905 and 1929' in Saul Dubow, ed. Science and Society in Southern Africa (Manchester, forthcoming).
- ⁹ B. Friedman, Smuts. A Reappraisal (London, 1975), pp. 210-12; W. K. Hancock, Smuts. II. The Fields of Force 1919-1950 (Cambridge, 1968) pp. 505-6.
- ¹⁰ A.J.P. Taylor, 'The Great Equivocator', The Observer 12 June 1966.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Dubow, 'Commonwealth of Knowledge' and Martin van Meurs, J.C. Smuts. Staatsman, Holist, Generaal (Amsterdam, 1997).
- ¹² Dubow and Marks, 'Patriotism of race and place'. Hancock was not alone in this blindness. Christopher Fyfe has written recently on the silence in African history and imperial history of the importance of a white skin as the badge of authority for colonial rulers: race, he argues, 'was an essential tool of government which underpinned colonial rule', yet African historians have been generally unwilling to take account of the importance of race in upholding colonial authority ('Race, Empire and Decolonization in Africa', in S.McGrath et.al.eds, Rewriting African History, Edinburgh, 1997, p.22).
- ¹³ See, for example, Hancock's Hoernlé memorial address to the South African Institute of Race Relations, Are There South Africans?

(Johannesburg, 1966). Hancock is good on the problems of Anglo-Afrikaner ethnic tension, though his comments on the bantustan strategy suggest that his main criticisms of apartheid are directed to its practical feasibility rather than its desirability in principle. Quite remarkably he barely refers to black South Africans.

¹⁴ Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs (London, 1937), vol.I, p. 237; Hancock, Argument of Empire (Penguin Special, Harmondsworth, 1943) p.53.

¹⁵ S.G.Millin, General Smuts (London, 1936), vol.II, p.437.

¹⁶ Gallio, 'The Land of Lost Opportunities' Jan 30, 1929 (clipping from Baruch Hirson, newspaper unknown).

¹⁷ Friedman, Smuts, p.7.

¹⁸ Friedman, Smuts, p.21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p19.

²⁰ JCS to JX Merriman, 13 March 1906, in Smuts Papers, vol. II, p.242.

²¹ Kenneth Ingham, Jan Christian Smuts. The Conscience of a South African (London, 1986), p.167.

²² Ingham uses the term 'instinct' or 'innate' usually in combination with Afrikaner prejudice at least half a dozen times in his biography. For a typical expression of this, see Smuts, p.236: 'Once again Smuts was demonstrating his innate [my italics] ability [sic - ?inability] to look at the native problem through any but Afrikaner eyes.'

²³ Saul Dubow, 'Christopher Fyfe: A Comment', in McGrath et al., Rewriting African History, p.34.

²⁴ W.K. Hancock, Smuts I. The Sanguine Years. 1870-1919 (1962), pp.55-6.

²⁵ Smuts to W.T. Stead, 4 Jan. 1902, Smuts papers, vol. II, p.482. The accusation continues for three pages.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp.494-6.

²⁷ See Official Reports of General JH de la Rey and General JC Smuts together with other documents relating to the war in South Africa transl from the Dutch (London, the New Age Press, 1902) 'The Cruelty of the English towards Women and Children', report of J.L. van der Merwe (who fought under de la Rey in western Transvaal, formerly Mining Commissioner at Jhbg) who included a letter from the Women's Laager, District of Potchefstroom, 5 Jan 1901 to the Pres of the Great Congress in Worcester, 6 Dec 1900, pp.27-8:

A certain number of women had been taken prisoners in and around Potchefstroom and conducted to Welverdiend Station, a distance of about 4 hours' ride on horseback. The troops were accompanied on this march by some coloured women. The latter were allowed to sit on the wagons, but the Boer women had to go on foot, and were driven on by the Kaffirs. The consequence was that some fell down dead by the road, and that one woman gave birth to a child. On this occasion Kaffirs were used, and

they equalled the English soldiers in cruelty and barbarity

The women knelt before these Kaffirs and begged for mercy, but they were roughly shaken off, and had to endure even more impudent language and ride behaviour. Their clothes were torn from their bodies. The mothers were taken away from their children. ...

.... When the mothers were driven like cattle through the streets of Potch by the Kaffirs, the cries and lamentations of the children filled the air. The Kaffirs then jeered and cried: "Move on: till now you were the masters; but now we will make your women our wives." In this fearful state were the women obliged to march for four hours.

²⁸ N. Etherington, 'The Black Rape Scare of the 1870s', JSAS 15, 1, Oct. 1988. Anne Stoler makes much the same point about rape scares in colonies of white settlement more generally: 'the rhetoric of sexual assault and the measures used to prevent it had virtually no correlation with the incidence of rape of European women by men of color. Just the contrary: there was often no evidence, ex post facto or at the time, that rapes were committed or that rape attempts were made ...' ('Making empire respectable', 641)

²⁹ cf Stoler, 'Making empire respectable', 640-1.

³⁰ The literature is growing apace but see Peter Warwick, Black People and the South

African War, 1899-1902 (Cambridge, 1983), Bill Nasson, Black Participation in the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 and his Abraham Esau's War. A Black South African War in the Cape 1899-1902 (Cambridge 1991), and the papers in G. Cuthbertson, ed. Rewriting the South African War, (forthcoming). See also Frans Johan Pretorius, Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902 (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1991) and Jeremy Krikler, Revolution from Above, Rebellion from Below. The Agrarian Transvaal at the Turn of the Century (Oxford, 1993).

³¹ cf Warwick, Black People, pp.179-80.

³² Smuts to W.T. Stead, 4 Jan. 1902, in W.K.Hancock and J. van der Poel, eds. Selections from the Smuts Papers, vol.1, June 1886-May 1902 (Cambridge, 1966), 485.

³³ Lovate Fraser, 'Black armies: the German dream', Daily Mail, 4 June 1917 (emphasis in original), cited in W.R. Louis, Germany's Lost Colonies, 1914-19 (Oxford, 1967), pp.85-6.)

STUDIEN ZUM SÜDLICHEN AFRIKA

- Bd. 1 Hans Heese, Die Berliner am Kap. The German Missionaries and the African Political Organisation in the South Western Districts, 1902-1914
Ulrich van der Heyden, Der Einfluß der Afrikaner auf die Friedensverhandlungen zum Abschluß des Südafrikanischen Krieges im Jahre 1902
Wien 1993 (vergriffen)
- Bd. 2 Walter Sauer (Hg.), Das afrikanische Wien. Ein Stadtführer zu Bieber, Malangatana & Soliman
Wien 1996, ISBN 3-901446-01-X (vergriffen)
- Bd. 3 Walter Sauer (Hg.), Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte des Südlichen Afrika I. Ein Reader zur Vorlesung
Wien 1997, ISBN 3-901446-02-8
- Bd. 4 Walter Sauer / Gerlinde Ehrenreich (Hg.), European - Southern African cooperation in a globalising world. Conference Reader
Vienna 1998, ISBN 3-901446-04-4
- Bd. 5 Walter Sauer (Hg.), European - Southern African cooperation in a globalising world. Conference Report.
Vienna 1999, ISBN 3-901446-05-2
- Bd. 6 Shula Marks
Before 'the white man was master and all white men's values prevailed'? Jan Smuts, race and the South African war
Vienna, 2000, ISBN 3-901446-06-0
- Bd. 7 Franz Fluch u. a., Kuito – Leben nach dem Krieg in Angola. Begleitheft zur Ausstellung
Wien 2003, ISBN 3-901446-07-9