

## BLACK LABOUR AND THE CONCENTRATION SYSTEM OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

Liz Stanley \*

"Urgent. How many able bodied native men have you in your camp available for work. Military depots require many. Fair wages will be paid. Natives refusing work are to be cut off rations." <sup>1</sup>

### 1. RE: THINKING ABOUT THE CONCENTRATION SYSTEM

Black people's part in the South African War, and also the existence of the black concentration camps, have received research attention since the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Most recently this has developed in two broad directions, one focusing on the black camps around the view that previous work "has greatly underplayed... [black people's] sufferings in the refugee camps"<sup>3</sup>, and the other on various African peoples and their involvement in and uses of the war, emphasising that "locality is an important factor in the way... [the war] was perceived and fought by black people..."<sup>4</sup> Both have produced interesting published work. However, these two strands have developed largely separately from each other, with unintended

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<sup>1</sup> Item 1983, 18 May 1901, SRC 49, Register of Correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> See D Denoon, "Participation in the 'Boer War': people's war; people's non-war or non-people's war?" in BA Ogot (ed.), *War and society in Africa* (London, 1972), pp. 109-22; P Warwick and SB Spies (eds), *The South African War 1899-1902* (London, 1980) and P Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902* (Johannesburg, 1983). Subsequent relevant works include M Genge, "The role of the EmaSwati in the South African War" in G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh and M-L Suttie, *Writing a wider war: Rethinking Gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Cape Town, 2002), pp. 136-58; S Kessler, "The black concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902: shifting the paradigm from sole martyrdom to mutual suffering", *Historia* 44, 1999, pp. 110-47; S Kessler, "The black and coloured concentration camps" in Fransjohan Pretorius, *Scorched earth* (Cape Town, 2001), pp. 132-53; J Lambert, "Loyalty its own reward: the South African War experiences of Natal's 'loyal' Africans" in Cuthbertson *et al.*, pp. 115-35; B Mbenga, "The role of the Bakgatla of the Pilansberg in the South African War" in Cuthbertson *et al.*, pp. 85-114; JS Mohlamme, "African refugee camps in the Boer Republics" in Pretorius, pp. 111-31; BE Mongalo and K du Pisani, "Victims of a white man's war: blacks in concentration camps during the South African War (1899-1902)", *Historia* 44, 1999, pp. 148-82; B Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: A black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cape Town, 1991) and B Nasson, *Uyadela wen osulapho: Black participation in the Anglo-Boer War* (Randburg, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Mohlamme, p.111.

<sup>4</sup> Mbenga, p.85.

consequences: it leaves the so-called 'burgher camps' being seen as white;<sup>5</sup> and it fails fully to recognise that factors noted in different localities (increases in wage levels and in prices for agricultural produce, and increased demand for labour in a wide range of military, railway and harbour employment) were actually much wider phenomena.

In conceptualising 'concentration' as something concerning the camps conceived narrowly, and perceiving African agendas of combined resistance and involvement as occurring outside of this, what is lost sight of analytically is that these 'local' patterns were highly influenced by the concentration system. Given the then already existing racial order of white South Africa and its divisions of labour, during the war economic, military and other factors ensured that black people were always present in supposedly 'white' places as required labour; and this governed both the black camps and the workings of the concentration system overall. This term, 'concentration system', was coined by Emily Hobhouse to characterise the complex reverberations of the combination of 'scorched earth', the concentration camps, martial law (including as imposed by the Boers in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the Orange Free State), and the networks of spies used by both sides.<sup>6</sup> This was precisely a system, impacting on the totality of life, and affecting the moral sensibilities and behaviour of everyone.

The focus of discussion here is black people across the concentration system, their labour crucial but their presence remaining largely taken for granted. Black people were simultaneously both inside and outside of '(white) society' and this duality was inscribed into the structure of bureaucratic record-keeping in the concentration system: regular 'returns' of information had to be made for everyone, black as well as white, and consequently 'race' was written in a range of ways into wartime records and registers. Using detailed research on archival sources, the numbers and movements of black people around the concentration system up to and after the creation of the Native Refugee Department in both the 'Orange River Colony' (the erstwhile Free State) or ORC, and the 'Transvaal Colony' (the erstwhile ZAR), are examined in some detail, including the period of dispersal after peace had been declared. It concludes by briefly relating these materials to longer-term patterns of black people's settlement and labour.

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<sup>5</sup> See L Stanley, **Mourning becomes... Post/memory and the concentration camps in the South African War 1899-1902** (Manchester and New Brunswick, 2004), chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Emily Hobhouse to her aunt Mary, Lady Hobhouse, on 26 January 1901 in JH Balme, **To love one's enemies: The work and life of Emily Hobhouse compiled from letters and writings, newspaper cuttings and official documents** (Cobble Hill, 1994), p. 89.

## 2. RE: COUNTING BLACK PEOPLE IN THE SYSTEM

The (quasi-) civil administrations established in the ORC and Transvaal in February 1901, which took over running the black and 'white' camps from the military, set up departments with specific responsibility for them. Standard systems of record-keeping were slowly instituted. As part of this, "rules for the governance of refugee camp superintendents" were issued to ORC superintendents, emphasising uniform practices and requiring them to make exactly the same 'returns' of information for white and black inhabitants:

"14. On Saturday morning of each week a telegram must be sent to the Chief Superintendent of Refugee Camps Bloemfontein, stating the number of Refugees both black and white, specifying the number of adults, children over 12 and children under 12, in your camp receiving rations."<sup>7</sup>

These rules tacitly assumed the returns would be made for 'each', rather than 'both' black and white together, because rations were different.<sup>8</sup>

The records date from after February 1901. In some places, the embryonic camps were indeed refugee camps for those Boer people who were British supporters and/or 'hands-uppers'.<sup>9</sup> In other places, the 'concentrations' of people by the military started as travelling laagers rather than settled camps. However, even though both groups had to be provisioned, there are few signs that an earlier military stage of record-keeping was absorbed into the civil one – the records start largely from scratch.<sup>10</sup> There was a chief superintendent (in the ORC) and director (in the Transvaal) of burgher camps, with departments composed of administrators, clerical and stores personnel; and a complement of staff was employed for each camp.<sup>11</sup> These departments collated the weekly and monthly incoming 'returns', to

<sup>7</sup> SRC 1 /103, "Rules for the Governance of Refugee Camp Superintendents, Orange River Colony Camps" (n.d. but Feb/March 1901). There is likely to have been a similar document in the Transvaal.

<sup>8</sup> That is, the returns were linked to supplying the camps. It was assumed rations would be supplemented, for whites by purchase, for black people through agricultural production. Black rations cost less than white, mainly because differently constituted, although this was not as discriminatory as sometimes suggested for it resulted partly from trying to provide rations which approximated to a traditional diet. Cautions about generalising also apply, because there were several major changes to the rations systems between February 1901 and when 'the system' finally ended.

<sup>9</sup> See here A Grundlingh, *Die 'Hendsoppers' en 'Joiners'* (Pretoria, 1979, reprinted in 1999).

<sup>10</sup> The incoming superintendent of Kroonstad sent his first returns emphasising that no records before his arrival on 1 March 1901 could be found (SRC 5 / 1159, Kroonstad March 1901 death returns), which is indicative.

<sup>11</sup> Including a superintendent, a chief clerk and one or more junior ones, nurses and doctors, hospital orderlies and helping staff, cooks and servants, a group of black police headed by one or two white ones, cleaning staff, transport drivers.

facilitate managing movements of people and provisioning inhabitants, and carried out statistical work in producing, for instance, monthly averages of information. The use of racial markers was built into the compilation of the records from the start, but not by picking out those who were black as 'other' to an assumed but unmarked (white) norm. Two separate headings were designated for tabulations – usually as 'whites' and 'natives' – and everyone assigned to one or the other.<sup>12</sup> However, in practice there were many variations in using (and reworking) these terms, for 'race' was still emergent and often overlaid by notions of ethnicity.<sup>13</sup>

In the initial stages of the concentration system, increasing numbers of black people lived at locations around settlements that predated the war. These rapidly expanded once war was underway – the economic opportunities the war provided, danger of Boer attacks in more remote areas, and British 'sweeps' of the black population, brought many people into them. A number of the largest became the 'Native Refugee Camps'; most were attached to 'white' camps but with their own superintendents and a staff to run them.<sup>14</sup> Their able-bodied male inhabitants were seen as a valuable source of labour, and there were flurries of letters and telegrams between the ORC's chief superintendent and the administrators in these camps about 'boys' who would be available for work under what financial and other inducements. One instance occurred in May 1901:<sup>15</sup>

Item 1603 30 April 1901 to NRC Brandfort, Vredefort Road, Heilbron, Edenburg: Do not part with any more native boys, I shall require them.

Item 1633 1 May 1901 from Officer in charge of Native Dept. In the suggestion of the CC Troops: I write you to ask if you if you [sic] will supply the Supt of the R. Camps Bfo [Bloemfontein] with 12 boys for driving bullock wagons for convey of wood from ?Graameello farm to R. camp. My reply: No, Natives cannot be supplied from here apply Transport depot.

Item 1665 3 April [should be May] 1901 Supt NRC Bfn [Bloemfontein]: Please supply S.R.C. Bfn with 12 native boys for work in camp.

<sup>12</sup> Tables herein contain the terms originally used in the records to describe people of different ethnic and 'race' groups, but without accepting or condoning any racist meaning to them.

<sup>13</sup> Discussed extensively in Stanley 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Edenburg and Thaba 'Nchu were exceptions. See Stanley 2004, chapter seven, for case studies of these.

<sup>15</sup> All item numbers here from SRC 49, Register of Correspondence 18 February 1901–12 June 1901, Superintendent of Refugee Camps Collection, State Archives Depot, Bloemfontein.

Item 1695 3 May 1901 from SRC Brandfort: Native labour - 130 Baantoo going to Basutoland from Winburg are here, give instructions / 3 May reply: send me 50 Baantoo for work here.

Item 1853 13 May 1901 from C.R.C. Bfn. Re difficulties in obtaining native labour as Labour dept is breaking up. 14/5/01 Reply per no 1853: R.C.N. Bethulie has native servants.

Item 1881 14 May 1901 from A.P.C.N. Bfn. Re burying dead horses, prisoners were employed but other arrangements have to be made. 14/5/01 Reply to A.P.C.N. - how many boys are wanted and I may be able to supply them. 22/5/01 Reply to A.J.M. - boys will be supplied as soon as possible.

Item 1983 18 May 1901 To all Refugee Camps. Urgent. How many able bodied native men have you in your camp available for work. Military depots require many. Fair wages will be paid. Natives refusing work are to be cut off rations.

from Kroonstad R.340. Will give 80 to Camp & send 20 here.

from Heilbron R.341. Send 20 here.

from Brandft R.342. Send 50 here.

19/5/01 from Thabanchu. All available boys employed on military work. / Letter to C.O. 20/5/01 asking for scale of wages but presuming 30/- a month. / Reply 21/5/01 yes - with shelter & rations.

25/5/01 wire to Vredefort Rd R.364.... 25/5/01 Reply 64 men available.

29/5/01 ditto Thabanchu R.387.... 30/5/01 Reply as above by wire about scales.

3/6/01 Letter from L.N.R.C. Bfn. Only 10 available. 3/6/01 ditto returned & P.A.

Item 1992 20 May 1901 from S.V.O. L of C. Bfn. Kindly send: 120 natives to me for Hospital here & 80 to Hospital in Kroonstad. / 20/5/01 There are 100 natives available for Kroonstad. I have wired there to hand over 80 to O.R. Camp. I cannot supply more at Bfn. / 20/5/01 Wire from S.V.O. asking how many natives were supplied for Bfn & Kroonstad & asking for 40 for Springfontein. / 30/5/01 Wired reply R.392: cannot supply more at present.

Item 2060 21 May 1901 Wires from Edenburg, Bethulie, Aliwal North, Brandfort, Heilbron, Kroonstad, Vredefort Rd. Re supplies of able bodied natives.

Brandfort can supply	50
Heilbron	20
Aliwal North	-
Edenburg	40

Bethulie	boys won't work
Kroonstad	100
Vredefort Rd	64

Item 2070 20 May 1901 R.344 (senders no.) Wire to S.R.C. Edenburg stating 40 natives are to be sent here to report to C.O.O.

Item 2083 22 May 1901 to A.P.M. 20 boys are being sent to you tomorrow - those with wives & families in Ref camp should be docked 30/- per month.

Item 2159 28 May 1901 To C.O.O.Bfn. 64 boys are available at Vredefort Rd. & should 50 should be sent to Kroonstad & the balance to Bfn.

28/5/01 Reply asking for the lot for Bfn.

28/5/01 Wire to S.R.C. Vredefort Rd. R374 for boys to be sent here.

29/5/01 Lr to C.O.O. boys could not be sent if Cmdts chose to stop them.

3/6/01 noted & returned from above.

Item 2178 28 May 1901 from C.S.O. Bfn. Enclosing telegram from O.C. Heilbron advising about to send natives to Bfn & their families will accompany them.

28/5/01 Referred to D.A.A.G. - there is no accommodation for the families here.

28/5/01 Wire from O.C. Heilbron - families must accompany.

29/5/01 From C.O.O. Bfn - natives to be sent if possible without their families.

29/5/01 to C.O.O. Supt. has been wired not to send the families.

29/5/01 Wire R.388 to S.R.C. Heilbron not to send the families."

A 12 June 1901 report by Captain Trollope, the ORC's Chief Superintendent of Refugee Camps, provides further information about the employment of black people across the system:

"The Military authorities draw as far as possible on the ablebodied males for labour for which they pay a fair wage, while those Basutos who wish to return to their country, have... been allowed to do so, and receive a week's wages and 10/- for the road expenses. / This last measure while ensuring the gratitude of many natives successfully eases the pressure, and saves the country a sum in the end." <sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> From Chief Superintendent RC ORC to Sec ORC Admin, 12 June 1901; Ploeger Collection A2030, State Archives Depot, Pretoria.

As item 1695 above indicates, however, labour needs actually predominated, not least because wartime conditions existed. Black people were treated instrumentally, as the 29 May ruling in item 2178 suggests: in spite of the Heilbron superintendent's insistent 'families must accompany', they were not allowed to go with men moved elsewhere.

In mid-1901 the relationship between the 'burgher camps' and the 'native refugee camps' changed, largely because of the labour requirements of the British military, and a separate 'Native Refugee Department' (NRD) was organised under Major GJ Lotbinière:

"A Native Refugee Department for the Transvaal was taken in hand by me on the 15<sup>th</sup> June. On the 15<sup>th</sup> July... the general Commander in Chief authorised me to extend my organisation to the Orange River Colony... on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1901, [I] suggested that all Native Refugee families should be given an opportunity of cultivating their own food supply... This proposal would necessitate shifting the Native Concentration Camps out of the large towns, viz:- Aliwal North, Springfontein, Edenburg, Bloemfontein, Brandfort, Kroonstad, Heilbron, Kimberley, Harrismith, etc., and form fresh Camps along the Railway line, then considered sufficiently well blockhoused to ensure a protected area... by shifting the natives we wished to take them away from the vicinity of the large towns and Boer Concentration Camps, and at the same time to bring them as near normal conditions as the Military state of the country would permit... owing to the daily increased responsibilities in connection with the Burgher Camps, it could not be expected that the Native refugee question could receive [from the Burgher Camps Administration] the close study due to [so] important a question. On taking over the camps, on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, there were approximately 22 700 natives on the books... The total census for the five months - men, women, and children - are as follows:-...

	no. camps	men	women	children	total
Aug	22	- <sup>17</sup>	-	-	22713
Sept	23	4794	11309	20996	32096
Oct	25	6840	13570	23534	43944
Nov	25	7686	13892	24213	45791
Dec	26	8231	13941	23815	45987

(Not including Thaba'nchu District)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In this and following tables, '-' indicates that a return of 'none' was made, while a blank space indicates that no information was provided.

The result of our system to obtain native labour for the Army can be traced from the subjoined table :-

	<b>Army</b>	<b>Employ</b>		<b>Private</b>	<b>Employ</b>	
	men	women	children	men	women	children
Sept	715	104	60	126	6	2
Oct	1971	2	4	143	53	14
Nov	2055	3	1	92	95	32
Dec	3080	8	7	205	143	54

These figures are the actual numbers employed in the months named.

Taking the month of December: Of the 8 231 registered in our books, 3 080 are in government employ, 205 in private employ, also employment has been found for a few women and children, approximately 16 000 on the reserve; the figure for men includes the old and sick and most able bodied men are already in army employ.

In addition some 1 000 were employed by the camp superintendents as armed night watchmen, to prevent small parties of Boers from looting the camps, as ordinary policemen, plough boys, etc. Of the balance – about 4 000 – a considerable number would be in the Army employed locally, by commandants of stations, on local defence works, but have not been sent away from the camps..."<sup>19</sup>

The NRD's dispersal policy has proved highly confusing, because the 'native camps' were broken up as 'camps' in the narrow sense and their populations relocated, but returns were still made under the camp names.<sup>20</sup> These people were mainly thereafter involved in agricultural production, usually on what had been Boer farms (but often on the land possessed by these African peoples previously); they were paid at going rates for their produce, but in a 'carrot and stick' context, as item 1983 above indicates more widely.

<sup>18</sup> Variant spellings of the present Thaba 'Nchu in the records are indicative of how unsettled usage was at this time.

<sup>19</sup> Major GJ Lotbinière, Report on the Native Refugee Department, 18 January 1902, pp.1-4; Ploeger Collection A2030.

<sup>20</sup> Thus some research drawing on the Command Papers (or 'Blue Books') has assumed these were 'camps' in the narrow sense and continued existing as such to the war's end.



A full census for August 1901 for the ORC camps, in Table 1, shows that by then its 'native' camps had mostly stopped making returns to the SRC Department. There are, however, increases in numbers of black people in some places compared with the months before: Bloemfontein had experienced an increase of men and a larger one of women and children, and there had been a large increase of especially men at Harrismith, suggesting black people were being moved there for labour reasons:

**TABLE 1** White and black populations of ORC camps, 31 August 1901<sup>21</sup>

	Whites in Camp			Total White pop		Blacks in Camp			Total Black pop		Deaths White	Deaths Black
	men	women	chil- dren			men	women	chil- dren				
Aliwal North	707	1500	2230	4437		109	31	23	163		43	-
Bloem- fontein	856	1855	3856	6567		309	954	1281	2544		25	22
Brandfort	389	1031	1984	3404		no return	ditto	ditto	-		7	ditto
Bethulie	510	1544	2756	4810		no return	ditto	ditto	-		91	ditto
Edenburg	-	-	-	-		no return	ditto	ditto	-		-	ditto
Harri- smith	95	355	679	1129		2921	1178	2091	3269		3	3
Heilbron	383	992	2125	3500		no return	ditto	ditto	-		5	ditto
Kimber- ley	566	1144	1991	3701		236	551	804	1591		57	19
Kroon- stad	582	1006	1723	3311		no return	ditto	ditto	-		100	ditto
Lady- brand	93	218	467	778		-	-	-	-		-	-
Norval's Pont	518	1022	1675	3215		-	-	-	-		23	-
Spring- fontein	333	939	1621	2893		220	418	803	1441		10	4
Thaba- nchu	-	-	-	-		no return	ditto	ditto	-		-	ditto
Vredefort Rd	214	536	973	1723		434	506	930	1870		10	1
Winburg	461	754	1411	2626		-	-	-	-		5	-
Orange River	116	482	911	1509		14	602	621	1237		4	2
Krom- elleboog	3	3	13	19		-	-	-	-		-	-
Totals	5826	13381	2441 5	43622		1614	4236	6552	12402		382 <sup>22</sup>	51 <sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> SRC 132, Statistics Refugee Camps June 1901–Jan 1902.

<sup>22</sup> 18 men, 49 women and 315 children (under 12).

<sup>23</sup> 8 men, 9 women and 34 children (under 12).

No detailed census figures for the Transvaal camps exist for the period when the NRD started. However, a summary for 14 and 18 June and 12 July 1901, shown in Table 2, suggest that numbers there were also increasing quickly:

**TABLE 2** Burgher and 'coloured' populations of Transvaal camps 12 June, 28 June, 12 July 1901<sup>24</sup>

	Burghers				Coloured			
	Men	Women	Children	Total	Men	Women	Children	Total
14 June	-	-	-		229	191	333	733
28 June	8576	16078	18811	44465	244	800	1835	2879
12 July	8899	17477	22425	48881	-	-	-	-

By the August 1901 returns shown in Table 3, there had been a large increase of white people, particularly women and children:

**TABLE 3** White populations of Transvaal camps, 31 August 1901<sup>25</sup>

camp	total camp pop	men	women	children
Barberton	1938	295	744	899
Balmoral	1660	210	651	799
Belfast	1407	213	525	669
Heidelberg	2222	467	764	991
Irene	4655	1050	1679	1926
Johannesburg	3505	714	1285	1506
Klerksdorp	4588	503	1733	2352
Krugersdorp	4853	841	1844	2168
Middelburg	6523	1240	2459	2824
Mafeking	4676	819	1710	2147
Nylstroom	1475	218	536	721
Pietersburg	3713	995	1257	1467
Potchefstrom	7355	1141	2712	3502
Standerton	3297	622	1215	1460
Vereeniging	976	179	326	471
Volksrust	5271	707	2341	2223
Lydenburg	42	8	16	18
Waterval N.	8	2	3	3

<sup>24</sup> DBC 14, General Superintendent Return. 'Burghers' and 'Coloured' are the original terms; Director of Burgher Camps Collection, State Archives Depot, Pretoria.

<sup>25</sup> DBC 14, 31 August 1901 Returns.

Vryheid	197	15	104	78
Pretoria Relief	2000	157	725	1118
Jo'burg Relief	5739	412	2022	2703
totals	65,500	10,808	24,645	30,047

The Transvaal had more camps and a larger number of people in them than the ORC, even before it also became responsible for the (mainly very large) Natal camps.<sup>26</sup> The monthly returns from each camp provided regular numerical summaries, including people arriving and leaving, sicknesses and deaths, and the final numbers 'on the books'. Using the 31 August 1901 snapshot of the Transvaal white populations as a backcloth, some aspects of black people's presence and labour in the 'white' camps can be explored.<sup>27</sup>

The monthly returns in the archived records are generally incomplete - in any month, by no means all the returns for the white populations of the camps are extant. The 'white' camps with black people in them made separate 'natives' returns; these were probably sent on from the administrative centres in Pretoria and Bloemfontein to the NRD, and are now 'missing presumed destroyed'. However, together with those for white people, returns for Belfast and Barberton 'natives' and Pietersburg 'coloured burghers' are frequently present in the monthly returns, and those for Johannesburg 'natives' occasionally, while numbers of black people at Mafeking can be discerned from totals given in its superintendent's and medical officer's monthly reports. The discussion following therefore focuses on these Transvaal-administered camps.

**TABLE 4** Belfast and Pietersburg white, 'native' and 'coloured burgher' camp populations, 30 June 1901<sup>28</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Belfast whites	124	286	407	817	3
Belfast 'natives'	31	35	53	119	-
Pietersburg whites	873	982	1290	3145	54
Pietersburg 'coloured burghers'	48	56	57	161	1

<sup>26</sup> Some Natal camps did not start until late on; Natal-wide compilations of camp population figures are rare in the records.

<sup>27</sup> Similar information could be provided for ORC camps, although in less detail, but is omitted for space reasons.

<sup>28</sup> DBC 14, 30 June 1902, General monthly returns.

Table 4 provides totals for Belfast and Pietersburg for 30 June 1901. Belfast opened during June, so this was its first return. These totals, however, mask complicated comings and goings that all the camps routinely experienced, as shown by Belfast's detailed returns in Tables 5 and 6:

TABLE 5 Statistical return for Belfast, 30 June 1901<sup>29</sup>

	Men	Women	Children		Men	Women	Children
Camp 1 June NIL	-	-	-		-	-	-
Arrivals	134	302	415		134	302	415
Births	-	-	6				6
Total					134	302	421
Departures	10	15	12				
Deaths	-	1	2		10	16	14
Camp 30 June					124	286	407

TABLE 6 Natives statistical return for Belfast, 30 June 1901<sup>30</sup>

	Men	Women	Children		Men	Women	Children
Camp 1 June NIL	-	-	-		-	-	-
Arrivals	37	36	53		37	36	54
Births			1				
Total					37	36	54
Departures	6	6	1		6	6	1
Deaths	-	-	-				
Camp 30 June					31	35	53

In March 1902, one of the Transvaal's 'travelling inspectors', CEW Sands, visited Barberton and Belfast and reported on the white and black areas of both. At Barberton, "(t)here is a native location within the fencing for all natives who work in the camp. They are well accommodated at the Western end of the camp"; however, Sands was concerned about Belfast because "(t)he natives who work in the Camp come to and from the main location, which is 2 miles from the camp; arrangements should be made to establish a location for them nearer the camp limits".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> DBC 14, General monthly returns.

<sup>30</sup> DBC 14, General monthly returns. 'Natives' was emphasised in the original document.

<sup>31</sup> DBC 12, Reports on Barberton and Belfast, CEW Sands, Inspector of Burgher Camps, to Lt Col SJ Thompson, Director of Burgher Camps, March 1902.

A group referred to as 'coloured burghers' under their leader, Konrad Buys, arrived in Pietersburg camp from the Mara district in May 1901.<sup>32</sup> These people insisted they were not 'natives' but burghers, that is, full citizens. Arbitration was sought from the Transvaal's director of burgher camps, WK Tucker,<sup>33</sup> because how they were classified had consequences for rations, schooling for their children and status generally. They are usually recorded as 'coloured burghers', reflecting the 'in-between' status accorded them.<sup>34</sup> Returns will certainly have been made for black people in this camp, although they are only fleetingly caught sight of through occasional mentions in written records. However, none of the 'native' returns for Pietersburg are now extant.

The term 'native' was used in the monthly returns for the Transvaal camps for all non-white people, apart from at Pietersburg, thereby glossing many ethnic and other differences.<sup>35</sup> Many black men worked in these camps as watchmen, policemen and in other 'official' roles, while some men and women were sanitation and cleaning staff, hospital nurses, orderlies and so forth. Others were present as refugees in their own right. Some (including fairly young children) had been servants in Boer households, but numbers were low in most camps, partly because rationing rules discouraged this, more importantly because alternative forms of employment were available.

The populations of the Barberton, Belfast, Johannesburg, Mafeking and Pietersburg camps changed up to and beyond the end of the war. In Table 7, the different proportions of men and women are noticeable, with black men usually outnumbering black women, but white men never outnumbering white women. This was a product of black people being present largely around the labour requirements of the 'white' camps, with the need for male labour greater than for female.

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<sup>32</sup> As refugees and because of Boer/black confrontations around the Mara area. He was a grandson of the 'adventurer' Koenrad Buys, who produced children with a number of black women. See here N Mostert, *Frontiers: Epic of South Africa's creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa people* (London: Cape, 1992), pp.237-9, 610-2 for background.

<sup>33</sup> Before the war a surveyor, Tucker, had been Superintendent of Standerton camp before becoming the Transvaal's Director of Burgher Camps.

<sup>34</sup> This is explored in depth in Stanley 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Explored in Stanley 2004, in chapter seven especially.

**TABLE 7** Barberton, Belfast, Johannesburg, Mafeking and Pietersburg camp populations, 31 August 1901<sup>36</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Barberton whites	295	744	899	1938	75
Barberton 'natives'	44	33	48	125	2
Belfast whites	213	525	669	1407	25
Belfast 'natives'	56	58	77	191	1
Jo'burg whites	714	1285	1506		82
Jo'burg 'natives'	32	10	26	48	-
Mafeking whites	819	1710	2147	4676	32
Mafeking 'natives'	-	-	-	181	2
Pietersburg whites	995	1257	1467	3713	184
Pietersburg 'coloured burghers'	52	58	56	166	1

The totals of black people may look fairly constant over time, but beneath this there was considerable movement, just as there was for whites. Belfast's returns for November are shown in Table 8:

**TABLE 8** Barberton, Belfast, Johannesburg, Mafeking and Pietersburg camp populations, 30 November 1901<sup>37</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Barberton whites	279	663	778	1720	10
Barberton 'natives'	43	25	30	98	-
Belfast whites	265	505	604	1374	31
Belfast 'natives'	58	56	77	191	2
Jo'burg whites	591	1023	1207	2821	75
Jo'burg 'natives'	32	15	29	76	2
Mafeking whites	814	1829	1853	4496	
Mafeking 'natives'	-	-	-	317	

<sup>36</sup> DBC 14, 31 August 1901, General monthly returns; Mafeking medical officer's report August 1901.

<sup>37</sup> DBC 14, 30 November 1901, General monthly returns; Mafeking medical officer's report November 1901.

Pietersburg whites	843	72	1468	3583	46
Pietersburg 'coloured burghers'	49	58	55	162	3

A significant proportion of Belfast's black population was moved to a new 'native camp' in late November 1901 and thereafter 'returned' differently. The detailed returns show the group of black people involved were 35 men, 45 women and 70 children; and an accompanying letter notes that the new 'native camp' was located 'at the station'. Why the move occurred is not explained but these people were perhaps initially in Belfast as refugees,<sup>38</sup> with their labour then commandeered; and 'station' implies this was because of labour requirements by the military. It is likely that something similar happened with the black people glimpsed in early Pietersburg reports: that after the arrival of the 'coloured burghers', most of them were moved to work elsewhere within the concentration system, with the 'coloured burghers' doing the jobs they had done. Certainly the implication of the small totals of black people but predominance of men, and how work activities are mentioned in superintendents' reports, is that such changes occurred so as to shift black people around the concentration system as sources of labour.

Tables 9 and 10 show the populations of Barberton, Belfast, Mafeking and Pietersburg camps for February and March 1902. The Mafeking 'white' camp had a fairly large number of black people connected with it, probably because of the considerable British military presence in and around Mafeking.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately its detailed population returns are not extant and the totals below come from its written reports.

**TABLE 9** Barberton, Belfast, Mafeking and Pietersburg camp populations, 28 February 1902<sup>40</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Barberton whites	241	590	702	1533	5
Barberton 'natives'	33	19	28	80	-
Belfast whites	268	559	647	1474	-
Belfast 'natives'	27	9	5	41	-

<sup>38</sup> Boer raids on black kraals were common.

<sup>39</sup> See S Platje, **The Mafeking diary of Sol T Platje** (edited by John Comaroff and Brian Willan with Solomon Molema and Andrew Reed) (Cape Town, 1999), also contributors concerning the siege of Mafeking to I Smith (ed.), **The siege of Mafeking** (Johannesburg, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> DBC 12, 28 February 1902 General monthly returns; DBC 14, Mafeking medical officer's report February 1902. Numbers are different on the census sheet because this provides monthly averages.

Mafeking whites	798	1765	1767	4328	21
Mafeking 'natives'				260	
Pietersburg whites	557 <sup>41</sup>	1078	1212	2847	-
	66	168	200	434	10
Pietersburg coloured burghers	43	56	56	155	-

In late January 1902, Kitchener ordered the whole camp to be relocated to Colenso in Natal.<sup>42</sup> This occurred during February, but the 'coloured burghers', together with a camp for National Scouts and their families, stayed in Pietersburg, with a small staff of officials.

**TABLE 10** Barberton, Belfast, Mafeking and Pietersburg camp populations, 31 March 1902<sup>43</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Barberton whites	233	593	702	1508	2
Barberton 'natives'	30	13	24	67	-
Belfast whites	266	518	596	1380	7
Belfast 'natives'	33	11	5	49	-
Mafeking whites	807	1759	1781	4374	5
Mafeking 'natives'				282	
Pietersburg whites <sup>44</sup>	45				
Pietersburg coloured burghers	43	56	55	154	1

Peace was declared on 31 May 1902. The 'natives' returns for Barberton and Belfast as well as Mafeking for this month are not traceable, while Pietersburg's 'white' camp was still assimilated in a larger Natal camp. However, the information extant is shown in Table 11:

<sup>41</sup> The first set of figures here are those on the detailed return, the second are from the 28 February census for Transvaal camps and concern the rump of people not moved, discussed later.

<sup>42</sup> Around forty men from the commando under Beyers raided the camp. This could not have succeeded without the complicity of many inhabitants, thus Kitchener's decision.

<sup>43</sup> DBC 12, 31 March 1902, General monthly returns; DBC 14, Mafeking medical officer's report March 1902.

<sup>44</sup> A note added comments "at this point located in Natal".

<sup>45</sup> Pietersburg numbers are not distinguishable because returned at part of the overall population of the much larger Natal camp.



**TABLE 11** Barberton, Belfast, Mafeking and Pietersburg camp populations, 31 May 1902<sup>46</sup>

	men	women	children	total pop	deaths
Barberton whites	230	609	706	1545	2
Barberton 'natives'					
Belfast whites	278	555	634	1467	9
Belfast 'natives'					
Mafeking whites	715	1670	1681	4066	8
Mafeking 'natives'				296	
Pietersburg whites <sup>47</sup>					
Pietersburg coloured burghers	47	56	55	158	-

At the end of June 1902, Kemball Cook resigned as superintendent of Mafeking to oversee reparations work in the Zeerust and Rustenberg district that the camp's inhabitants had mainly come from, at the request of the War Office writing a report over-viewing his period there.<sup>48</sup> This contains weekly census figures made specifically for rationing purposes during June when repatriation was underway; those for the last two weeks of June are shown in Table 12 and demonstrate some of the complexities concerning what 'a camp' was.<sup>49</sup>

**TABLE 12** Mafeking camp rations census, June 1902<sup>50</sup>

	3 <sup>d</sup> week						4 <sup>th</sup> week					
	Men	Women	Under 12	Under 6	Under 3	Total	Men	Women	Under 12	Under 6	Under 3	Total
{South Camp}	609	1403	879	312	123	3326 }	543	1120	714	256	95	2728 }
{North Camp}	77	182	111	24	11	405 }	70	123	88	18	8	307 }

<sup>46</sup> DBC 11, 31 May 1902; DBC 14 Mafeking superintendent's report May 1902.

<sup>47</sup> A note added comments "at this point still located in Natal and population numbers not provided separately".

<sup>48</sup> See Kemball Cook Collection Cullen A62f, "Report written by request of the War Office", Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

<sup>49</sup> Kemball Cook provides detailed breakdowns for only the two camps where he was directly responsible for rationing.

<sup>50</sup> 'N.S.' was a camp for National Scouts and their families. The rebel camp contained men, women and children from the Cape. See Kemball Cook Collection Cullen A62f "Report", p.14.

Rebel Camp						375						375
Willow Dam						151						151
Settegoli (N S )						233						233
Peace Surren- derers						626						626
Natives						400						400
Totals						5516						4820

With regard to the black people working in Mafeking, Kemball Cook's report contains interesting information: "A large gang of natives under the Camp Sanitary Inspector" was employed to assist people as part of the weekly inspection and cleaning of their tents as well as all public spaces; in addition, "(a) large gang of natives was also constantly employed for general scavenging duties"; while "(t)wo Coolies were also allowed to visit the Camp daily to sell fruit"; while there was a group of 'Transport Boys' responsible for the mules and oxen used to transport stores.<sup>51</sup> The head of each of the administrative departments in the camp "was allowed two (2) Natives from the Native Refugee Camp [i.e. as servants]. Any servants hired from outside had to be paid by the hirer. One Native was attached to each mess, and each Mess was provided with a Cook. These rules did not apply to the Superintendent who provided his own private servants", with a 'mess' here indicating the cooking and eating arrangements for the various occupational groupings among camp staff.<sup>52</sup> A paragraph on the 'native camp' additionally comments that:

"The Native Refugee Camp was by composition small – consisting of about three hundred (300) souls. It was visited daily by a Medical Officer and a Camp Nurse. The health of this Camp was extremely good. The inmates received their stores at a separate place and a different time. The site of the camp was frequently changed, which was essential from a sanitary point of view."<sup>53</sup>

After 31 May 1902, winding down the concentration system was a lengthy process. Initially, large numbers of both Boer and black people moved around the system closer to their homes. Amongst the Boers, it was the poorest, those most adversely affected and orphans who remained the longest, with some camps not closing until

<sup>51</sup> Kemball Cook Collection Cullen A62f, "Report", p.5, p.13, p.16.

<sup>52</sup> Kemball Cook Collection Cullen A62f, "Report", p.14.

<sup>53</sup> Kemball Cook Collection Cullen A62f, "Report", pp.14-5.

January and February 1903. At the end of May 1902, the sixteen Transvaal 'white' camps (i.e. without Pietersburg and the Natal Camps) contained just under 45 000 people. Four months later, at the end of September, the total for the seventeen 'white' camps (Pietersburg was moved back to the Transvaal in June) was just under 12 000 people.<sup>54</sup>

A census of 'burgher and 'native' populations of Transvaal camps shows the pattern of dispersal from early September 1902 to late January 1903. Table 13 provides figures for September 1902:

**TABLE 13** 'Burgher' and 'native' populations of Transvaal camps, 30 September 1902<sup>55</sup>

	Burghers					'Natives'				
	total	men	women	children	deaths	total	men	women	children	deaths
Barberton	338	105	108	125	-	15	9	2	4	-
Balmoral	287	84	108	95	2	14	7	2	5	-
Belfast	543	131	179	233	-	41	28	8	5	-
Heidelberg	666	188	228	250	1	23	9	9	5	-
Irene	1671	409	514	748	4	152	102	25	25	1
Jo'burg	48	19	10	19	-	18	8	4	6	-
Klerksdorp	1788	386	684	718	5	-	-	-	-	-
Kruggersdorp	1673	420	615	638	2	30	7	10	13	-
Mafeking	1242	376	427	439	2	173	83	67	23	1
Meintjies Kop	317	108	119	90	2	19	19	-	-	-
Middleburg	1186	402	408	376	2	195	68	35	92	-
Pietersburg	1839	529	635	675	8	-	-	-	-	-
Potchefstroom	3756	1140	1170	1446	6	39	29	5	5	-
Standerton	2085	608	695	782	2	145	57	27	61	-
Volkstus	2057	714	686	657	5	99	76	12	11	-
Vryburg	218	66	79	73	1	36	20	10	6	-
Vereeniging	255	57	84	114	2	32	18	7	7	-
Total	11969	5742	6749	7478	44	1031	540	223	268	2

Of the Transvaal camps discussed above, the 'coloured Burghers' from Pietersburg left in June 1902 and returned to Mara, while most black people left Belfast and Barberton between the end November and late December 1902. In understanding the labour processes at work, it is useful to consider the weekly exits from Belfast, shown in Table 14:

<sup>54</sup> DBC 11, May and August 1902, General monthly returns; and DBC 15, Register of census, sick, deaths and births.

<sup>55</sup> DBC 15, Register of census, sick, deaths and births.

**TABLE 14** Black and white populations of Belfast camp, 30 September - 26 December 1902<sup>56</sup>

	Natives				Burghers			
	total	men	women	children	total	men	women	children
30 Sept	41	28	8	5	543	131	179	233
3 Oct	39	26	8	5	570	154	178	238
10 Oct	38	25	8	5	482	108	156	218
17 Oct	38	25	8	5	454	97	146	211
24 Oct	38	25	8	5	455	96	145	214
31 Oct	37	24	8	5	399	82	122	195
7 Nov	37	24	8	5	350	72	104	174
14 Nov	37	24	8	5	424	102	128	194
21 Nov	39	24	10	5	384	86	119	179
28 Nov	39	24	10	5	223	64	74	87
5 Dec	28	15	8	5	224	64	75	85
12 Dec	28	15	8	5	293	91	92	110
19 Dec	28	15	8	5	142	41	45	56
26 Dec	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Most of the black people in Belfast 'white' camp in September stayed until it closed in late December, almost certainly because they had jobs there. The situation for whites was different: initially there were fairly small movements of people in and out; then, over five weeks, larger groups of people arrived and even larger groups left, but with 142 white people remaining in the camp when it closed. This was because they had nowhere else to go, as many of the closing reports from superintendents confirm.

The remaining numbers of black people in the Transvaal camps were very low by 31 December 1902 and men still predominated, as shown in Table 15; also the camps they were located in were ones with still significant populations of white people:

**TABLE 15** Black populations of Transvaal camps, 31 December 1902<sup>57</sup>

	total	men	women	children	deaths
Barberton	-	-	-	-	-
Balmoral	-	-	-	-	-
Belfast	-	-	-	-	-
Heidelberg	-	-	-	-	-

<sup>56</sup> DBC 15, Register of census, sick, deaths and births.

<sup>57</sup> DBC 15, Register of census, sick, deaths and births.

Irene	76	60	7	9	-
Johannesburg	-	-	-	-	-
Klerksdorp	-	-	-	-	-
Krugersdorp	-	-	-	-	-
Mafeking	105	52	25	28	1
Meintjies Kop	-	-	-	-	-
Middelburg	161	48	39	74	-
Pietersburg	-	-	-	-	-
Potchefstrom	26	20	3	3	-
Standerton	137	50	27	60	-
Volksrust	24	17	5	2	-
Vryburg	-	-	-	-	-
Vereeniging	-	-	-	-	-
Total	529	247	106	176	1

Mafeking camp closed between 26 December and 2 January. There were similar patterns of movement of its black and white populations beforehand as at Belfast, shown in Table 16:

**TABLE 16** Black and white populations, Mafeking camp, 5 December 1902 - 2 January 1903<sup>58</sup>

	'Natives'				Burghers			
	total	men	women	children	total	men	women	children
5 Dec	160	71	42	47	207	67	70	70
12 Dec	160	71	42	47	157	68	69	20
19 Dec	160	71	42	47	84	19	27	38
26 Dec	161	71	42	48	79	18	25	36
2 Jan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

As part of these vast movements of 'removed' people, returning commandos and former prisoners-of-war around the country after May 1902, thousands of black farmers under the aegis of the Native Refugee Department were removed from the land they had occupied during the war. Unfortunately the bulk of the records of the NRD are no longer extant, although traces remain. Thus a September 1902 report from Lotbinière concerns the repatriation of some of these people, about 6000 ORC black people in Natal (and presumably concerning similar numbers from the Transvaal in a no longer extant parallel report), and about 7000 people in the Harrismith area:

<sup>58</sup> DBC 15, Register of census, sick, deaths and births.

"The Natives were allowed to locate themselves on deserted farms and in native locations and reserves... They received no rations from the Natal Government, and succeeded in maintaining themselves to the present time. Many... brought cattle with them and may be considered... well off compared with the bulk of the Native Refugees in the camps of the O.R.C. and the Transvaal.

... they were not wanted in Natal, and further they should not in fairness be detained any longer, as the Natives themselves were anxious to return to their former kraals and take advantage of the approaching season for the cultivation of their crops...

It has been the earnest endeavour of this department to secure to the Natives in their charge a fair means of returning to their kraals with sufficient food to maintain themselves until they can grow a fresh supply, and with all their claims, as substantiated by bona fide receipts, paid to them in cash...

I confidently hope, if no unforeseen difficulties arise, that the 6000. odd natives from Natal and the 7000. odd in the Harrismith camps will all be back in their former kraals by the end of October 1902."<sup>59</sup>

Lotbinière's comments about these farmers being comparatively well off and having secured 'a fair means of returning' were not empty words, although his attempts also to secure for them a lump sum payment and extra supplies were unsuccessful. Also African groups whose labour was not commandeered but who had become involved in the war in other ways pursued their own agendas to right past wrongs and to accumulate wealth through captured livestock or regaining land. And in addition, a very large number of black people gained skills and experience in a very different kind of economic system than a traditional peasant farming or herding one and proved themselves, at least in many British eyes, to be considerably more adaptable to the needs of industrial capitalism than Boer people. Those who suffered the most and lost the most were, like Boer people, those whose land had been 'scorched' and devastated, who lost their livelihoods and had many family members die during the epidemics that produced extremely high mortality rates in both the black and the 'white' camps.

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<sup>59</sup> Report by GJ Lotbinière "Re: Repatriation of native refugees in Natal to the Orange River Colony", 5 September 1902; Ploeger Collection A2030.

### 3. RE: REPATRIATION AND THE AFTER-LIFE OF THE SYSTEM

The research materials discussed herein show that viewing the war as experienced by black people around a binary structure composed by, on the one hand, black and 'white' concentration camps, and on the other a world in which black people were variously involved or disengaged from the war and pursued their own agendas including exploiting new labour market opportunities, is mistaken. The concentration system had precisely systemic impact. What existed was not a binary divide but rather a large in-between involving black people as semi-conscripted labour, the essential labour on which the concentration policy and British military activities hinged.<sup>60</sup>

Many black people were 'swept' from their homes into the black as well as the 'white' camps as part of 'scorched earth'; others were 'swept' from places where they were working, sometimes far from their homes; yet others entered camps as refugees from conflict between Boers and British or because they were targets of Boer violence. The black camps were not separate and distinct but rather actual and potential sources of labour to be moved around the system, as the flurry of such activity in May 1901 outlined earlier indicated. Later, while in theory they remained intact as 'camps', in practice their populations were dispersed to many formerly Boer farms, largely as labour involved in farming for military government purchase. Situated around the 'white' camps, or in separate locations attached to existing towns, were other groups of black people, predominantly but by no means exclusively men. Many of them worked for the military or in towns in a very wide variety of jobs; others were employed by the camps as police, orderlies, cooks, nurses, drivers and grooms, domestic servants, refuse workers and more, with only small numbers working as servants to Boer households in the 'white' camps. And in other areas, through wartime work attached to the British military, in farming for military purchase or other employment receiving high wage levels and also the accumulation of cattle and re/gaining of land, many African people did well out of the war, at least in the fairly short-term. The effects of these massive changes remained consequential over a longer period in a range of ways, with four factors in particular being noteworthy.

Firstly, most of the black people who remained working in the camps at the point of closure stayed in the same immediate vicinity after these had officially been closed, as did other people around military stations. These were the basis of new 'locations' of black people, in many cases forming permanent (apartheid permitting)

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<sup>60</sup> Boer practices with regard to black labour were more draconian albeit on a smaller scale; see SB Spies, **Methods of barbarism: Roberts, Kitchener and civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900-May 1902** (Cape Town, 1977), pp. 15-6; also Lambert, pp. 115-8.

settlements. Sometimes a range of kinds of employment were available around these places, but more usually it meant reliance on service economy roles in relation to whites or else work as agricultural labourers.

Secondly, migrancy as a characteristic of African labour, or rather of white requirements for a concentrated labour force, is something particularly associated with mining activities. However, it is clear that labour migrancy in relation to other forms of employment had already been underway when the war started.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the labour requirements of the concentration system encouraged many more white people to view black people as 'engines of labour' who would 'belong' in one place but work in another at the convenience of employers.

Thirdly, many black people who had money accumulations from wartime work used this to withdraw their labour from some (or all) kinds of employment with whites. Thus, for instance, post-war the writer and social commentator Olive Schreiner found black people boycotted working for her because she was perceived as pro-Boer (rather than anti-British imperialism) and commented it would be some years before the money accumulated would be spent.<sup>62</sup> While some people lived on accumulations of wages until these were exhausted and then returned to more dependent forms of wage labour, many others used such accumulations to underpin more independent forms of economic activity.

Lastly, from the time that internal markets had opened up around diamond and gold mining, landed whites entered into a range of different kinds of share-cropping arrangements with black farmers to produce food for the human and animal populations involved in these activities. War-time increases in wage rates and increased prices for agricultural produce enabled many black farmers to further increase their productivity post-war through investments financed by their war-time accumulations. In the context of a massive increase of the 'poor white' problem exacerbated by the war, there was "a populist mobilisation of sentiment against African competition on the land... no doubt exaggerated by cultural and political leaders...", with the Natives Land Act of 1913 growing out of these circumstances.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Many early camp registers including black people record information about people's place of origin.

<sup>62</sup> See OS to Fan Schreiner, 30 June 1902; OS to Julia Solly, ? December 1902; both BC 16 Schreiner, University of Cape Town; also L Stanley, **Imperialism, labour and the new woman: Olive Schreiner's social theory** (Durham, 2002), chapter 3.

<sup>63</sup> T Keegan, "Introduction" in RW Msimang, **Natives Land Act 1916: Specific cases of evictions and hardships, etc.** (Cape Town, 1996 [orig. 1913]), p. vi-vii.