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Bushman or Boer – Australian Identity in a ‘White Man’s War’, 1899–1902

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ABSTRACT

This article considers Australian articulations of identity and representations of Boer soldiers in the South African War. Examining accounts from Australian war correspondents and military personnel, we make three observations. First, that widespread expressions of British Empire loyalty shaped rather than excluded expressions of nascent Australian nationalism. Second, that emergent Australian nationalism, particularly the notion of the ‘bushman’, was central to positive and negative comparisons to Boer soldiers. Finally, that transnational discourses of settler colonialism and whiteness enabled such comparisons, which simultaneously facilitated claims about Australian martial superiority and deceptive Boer indolence, despite noted similarities between bushman and Boer.

Introduction

‘We think of the Boers as semi-savages. [But] We have plenty of people just as rough as they are’, declared the radical nationalist Australian poet, Banjo Paterson, in early December 1899 soon after his arrival in Cape Town as the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* war correspondent for the South African (Boer) War (1899–1902).¹ Paterson was not the only Australian writer of the South African War who held the Boers in low opinion, nor who saw their similarities with Australians. According to others, some Boers looked like ‘common Australian tramp[s]’,² others like ‘such a crowd as one is

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¹R.W.F. Droogleever (ed.), *From the Front: A.B. (Banjo) Paterson’s Dispatches from the Boer War*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2000), p. 32.

²Cited in Doris V. Roberts, album, Australian War Memorial (hereinafter AWM): PR85/418, p. 14.

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apt to see in a far inland shearing shed in Australia',³ and yet others appeared 'as spare, and lank, and brown as any Queenslander'.⁴ The author of this last comment, Corporal J. H. M. Abbott of the First Australian Horse, acknowledged in his 1902 account of the war that the Boers 'may be liars by nature', but they were nonetheless 'much of the same kind as we'.⁵

The bushman of the Australian outback and the Boer of the South African veld shared many similarities in the imagination of Australian writers. Physically, contemporary sources asserted, both were unkempt, rugged and masculine. Temperamentally, they were skilled horsemen and shooters and well-versed in trekking over vast tracts of country. Most conspicuously, of course, they were both white, which along with the tacit agreement between British and Boer parties to minimise the use of soldiers of colour, gave the war its well-known, although inaccurate, moniker, the 'white man's war'.⁶

Contemporary beliefs about race thinking are a crucial departure point for reconsidering the South African War from an Australian perspective. In the last two decades, historians have done much to highlight the ways in which 'whiteness' became a critical mode of subjective identification in Anglo-settler colonies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ As a transnational project, many of the manifestations of Australian whiteness took their inspiration from other parts of the world – notably in the case of the dictation test, from the British colony of Natal in South Africa, which was itself derived from earlier proposals in the United States.⁸ Yet historians have largely ignored the significance of Australians' involvement in the South African War – white colonial soldiers, fighting a white enemy, in a 'white man's war'. This gap in the scholarship merely compounds the existing marginal position of the

³A.G. Hales, *Campaign Pictures of the War in South Africa (1899–1900): Letters from the front*, (London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1900), p. 88.

⁴J.H.M. Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk: Being some account of the less notable features of the South African War from the point of view of the Australian ranks*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 242.

⁵Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 251.

⁶See Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899–1902*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 6–27.

⁷Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White men's countries and the question of racial equality*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008).

⁸Marilyn Lake, 'From Mississippi to Melbourne via Natal: the invention of the literacy test as a technology of racial exclusion', in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006), pp. 209–29.

South African War in Australia's military historiography, which is typically sidelined by research on the First and Second World Wars.

In this article, we suggest that negotiations of racial identity were just as important an aspect of the South African War as its military and political dimensions. Drawing on extensive use of the records held by the Australian War Memorial, this article begins where past scholarly research has been heaviest, examining how Australians couched their expressions of loyalty within an unequivocally imperial framework, but in ways that were mutually inclusive of nascent Australian nationalism. We then consider the interaction between these expressions of Australian identity and Australian representations of Boers – particularly focusing on the tropes and concepts, such as the rugged bushman, that writers highlighted as sites of similarity between the two groups. Finally, we argue that the axes along which writers considered the similarity and difference between Australian and Boer were inextricable from the context of settler colonialism and transnational whiteness that defined the white colonies. This enabled the lines along which it could be claimed that one type of white settler – the Australian bushman – might prove to be superior to their 'semi-savage' white counterparts on the African veld.

The elusive Boer

Most of the research into British representations of Boers has been conducted by British and South African scholars, with little scholarship on Australian perspectives. Effie Karageorgos is a recent exception to this trend, but her article on the topic makes a number of conceptually dubious claims.⁹ Karageorgos contends that Australian soldiers' attitudes towards the Boers changed over time, with complex, ambiguous reactions to Boers. However, her work fails to outline the broader structures within which Boers were often understood, so her claims are unconvincing.¹⁰ For instance, Karageorgos' claim that Australian soldiers demonstrated empathy for Boer soldiers because of their shared rural backgrounds is not only empirically questionable, it also does not acknowledge, as we do in our analysis, how settler colonialism provided the

⁹Effie Karageorgos, "'Educated, tolerant and kindly": Australian attitudes towards British and Boers in South Africa, 1899–1902,' *Historia* 59, no. 2 (2014): pp. 120–35. For an earlier study, see Barbara R. Penny, 'Australia's reactions to the Boer War: a study in colonial imperialism', *Journal of British Studies* 7, no. 1 (November 1967): pp. 97–130.

¹⁰Karageorgos addresses the broader context more successfully in a later article that examines Australian perceptions of black Africans: see Effie Karageorgos, 'War in a "White Man's Country": Australian perceptions of Blackness on the South African battlefield, 1899–1902,' *History Australia* 15, no. 2 (2018), pp. 323–38.

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overarching framework within which rurality was given symbolic meaning and significance.¹¹

There is slightly more scholarship on British, as distinct from Australian, perceptions of Boers. Noting that the South African War was, in many respects, a modern 'media war', research has focused on depictions of Boers in British propaganda and popular culture.¹² Simon Pople, for instance, contends that the emphasis of many British depictions was the 'violent and oppressive nature' of Boers as colonial masters, unfit to be the imperial rulers of Southern Africa.¹³ This is an instructive example, but not definitive for understanding the approach of Australians, who were situated within a particular context of settler colonialism and emergent nationalism at the time of Federation (1901).

Boer perceptions of the British have also received scholarly attention. Bill Nasson argues that unlike British representations of Boers, Boer representations rarely identified any racial failing on the part of the British, but highlighted instead the unjust nature of the war.¹⁴ More recent research by Fransjohan Pretorius has confirmed this point, adding that Boer propaganda typically sought to boost the morale of Boer

¹¹There is empirical contestation about the extent to which Australian soldiers in the Boer War came from rural backgrounds. See, for example, Luke Trainor, 'Building Nations: Australia and New Zealand', in David Omissi and Andrew S. Thompson (eds.), *The Impact of the South African War*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 252, 258; Craig Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War: The war in South Africa, 1899–1902* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 327; W.M. Chamberlain, 'The characteristics of Australia's Boer War volunteers', *Australian Historical Studies* 20, no. 78 (1982), p. 48.

¹²See, for example, Stephen Badsey, 'The Boer War as a media war,' in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds), *The Boer War: Army, nation and empire* (Canberra: Army History Unit, Department of Defence, 2000). Available at:

https://www.army.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-11/1999_boer_war_army_nation_and_empire_0.pdf Accessed 2 December 2020;

Peter Harrington, 'Pictorial journalism and the Boer War: the London illustrated weeklies', in John Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War: Direction, experience, and image*, (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 241–2; Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge: The poetry of the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 236–49; John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British public opinion, 1880–1960*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

¹³Simon Pople, 'From "brother Boer" to "dirty Boers": colonizing the colonizers through the popular representations of the Boer in the *British Illustrated Journal* 1899–1902,' *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 5, no. 2 (2012), p. 148.

¹⁴Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899–1902*, (London: Arnold, 1999), p. 253.

soldiers through the dissemination of manipulated war reports, or the delivery of rousing speeches from charismatic leaders.¹⁵

The South African War fits uncertainly into conventional Australian military historiography. A major factor for this lies in the non-unified manner of Australian participation in the war. Not only did the six colonies and Australian Commonwealth (following Federation) have different experiences of the war, but even contingents from the same colony had diverse experiences, depending on the specific actions in which they participated, and the phase in the war to which they contributed. With no equivalent to Gallipoli (First World War), Kokoda (Second World War) or Long Tan (Vietnam War), later histories do not identify a single big moment around which to build a compelling narrative of Australian participation in the South African War. One result of this is that when modern historians have made a claim about the significance of the South African War to Australian political or cultural history, they have tended to do so without closely considering the war itself.¹⁶ In this article we hope to open a discussion about the significance of this conflict for Australia through representations of the Boer enemy in sources written by Australians who were at the front, either as military personnel or war correspondents.

The empire, right or wrong?

Edmund Barton, later to become the first Australian prime minister, argued, ‘the empire, right or wrong’ when he urged the New South Wales parliament to lend military support to Britain in South Africa.¹⁷ Not all colonial parliamentarians shared Barton’s ardour, but his phrase was nonetheless an accurate portrayal of Australian attitudes towards the conflict, especially after the disastrous defeats of British forces during ‘Black Week’ in December 1899.¹⁸ The symbolism of the British Empire and

¹⁵Fransjohan Pretorius, ‘Boer propaganda during the South African War of 1899–1902,’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 3 (2009), pp. 399–419.

¹⁶See, for example, Jim Davidson, ‘Also under the Southern Cross: Federation Australia and South Africa – the Boer War and other interactions’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 14 (2012): 183–204; Henry Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2016). Wilcox is an exception: see for example, Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*; Craig Wilcox, “Australians in the wars in Sudan and South Africa”, in Craig Stockings and John Connor (eds.), *Before the Anzac Dawn: A military history of Australia to 1915*, (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), pp. 204–29.

¹⁷Edmund Barton, *New South Wales Hansard, Legislative Assembly*, 19 October 1899, p. 1495, quoted in Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The initiation of Australia*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1992), p. 64.

¹⁸See C.N. Connolly, “Manufacturing ‘spontaneity’: The Australian offers of troops for the Boer War”, *Australian Historical Studies* 18, no. 70 (1978), pp. 106–117; L.M. Field, *The Forgotten War: Australia and the Boer War*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University

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the articulation of imperial loyalty suffused expressions of Australian involvement in this conflict.

A poster presented to a departing Australian contingent for the South African War, 'An Australian to Australians' (1900) (Figure 1), epitomised the inextricability of Australia's war involvement and the British Empire at large.



Figure 1 – 'An Australian to Australians'¹⁹

Labelled a 'British square', after the famous British infantry formation, the image simultaneously centres Australia and the empire as a whole. In the central panel, the phrase 'Advance Australia' is counterbalanced with 'One Empire', which is surrounded on all four sides by the flags of the British Empire – an appeal to the 'Patriotic instincts of all Loyal Britishers all over the wide world'. These symbols are superimposed on a Union Jack, and linked on the edges by a thin red line representing the 'crimson thread of kinship', reifying not only the centrality of British origins, but also the ongoing race connections keeping the empire together. The flags of the United States dotted around

Press, 1979), pp. 1–34; Stephen Clarke, "'Manufacturing spontaneity'? The role of the commandants in the colonial offers of troops to the South African War", in Dennis and Grey (eds.), *The Boer War. On 'Black Week'*, see Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, (London: Abacus, 1992 [1979]), p. 249; Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, pp. 25–6.

¹⁹AWM: ART19683.

the outside of the square form an appreciative nod to 'the kindly feeling of our American cousins', and are an example of the racial ideology of Anglo-Saxonism that was ascendant in much of the English-speaking world at the time.²⁰

While the British Isles formed the centre of this image, in another artefact from the same period, Queen Victoria provides the central point of reference. Figure 2 is a commemorative cabinet plate that celebrates the federation of the Australian colonies in the context of British Empire loyalty and the South African War. Visually, this connection is represented by metonymic representations of Australia and the Crown – the slouch-hatted soldier (centre-left) and 'father of federation', Henry Parkes (top-right); and the helmeted British soldier (centre-right) and Australia's first governor-general, Lord Hopetoun (top-left). This connection is confirmed by a quote from Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, which conflates the union of the Australian colonies with British imperial unity, and links federation to military sacrifice in the South African War: 'May the union between the colonies and the mother-land now cemented by their blood be forever maintained'. The artwork on this plate appears to be almost identical to that of the 'Tenterfield Jug' identified by Jim Davidson, suggesting that it was a widespread motif in Australia.²¹ As Davidson argues, 'a federated Australia emerged within the Empire, ratified by participation in the Boer War'.²²

²⁰See Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, pp. 109–113.

²¹Davidson, 'Also under the Southern Cross', pp. 184–6.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 186.



Figure 2 – Australian Federation commemorative plate²³

Queen Victoria maintained her central place in the iconographic order of Great Britain when Australian soldiers arrived at the front.²⁴ Soldiers celebrated her birthday by 'sending up rockets and burning blue lights', and mourned her death by 'play[ing] the Death March and march[ing] past Headquarters'.²⁵ War correspondent William Reay recalled with particular delight the New Year's chocolates issued by the Queen on a tin bearing her likeness, which he saw Australians proudly refusing to sell, even for the price of five sovereigns.²⁶ The Tasmanian Captain Richard Lewis wrote that those saddened by the Queen's death were giving 'no mere pretence of loyal regret and

²³AWM: ART91509.

²⁴See Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 151.

²⁵Captain Joseph Dallimore DSO, *Victorian Imperial Bushmen*, diary, AWM: PR01379, transcript book 1, p. 18; Captain Edwin Tivey DSO, *Victorian Imperial Bushmen*, diary, AWM: PR 3DRL/3058, p. 3.

²⁶W.T. Reay, *Australians in War: With the Australian Regiment from Melbourne to Bloemfontein*, (Melbourne: A.H. Massina & Co., 1900), p. 88.

grieving. The great Queen was regarded by her Army as something more than a noble woman, a venerable figurehead of the state'.²⁷

'The rhetoric of empire appears to be everywhere ... for it was everywhere', Bill Schwarz remarks, but he cautions that 'it cannot always be taken on its own terms'.²⁸ We must take care not to throw out historians' caution against the overstatement of imperial loyalty in the South African War.²⁹ Individual experiences of the empire are hard to trace. Some historians have argued that it was likely that among the empire's working classes, empire excited primarily 'indifference' or 'apathy'.³⁰ National background also played a role. For the Irish in Australia, the war created rifts in opinion. C.N. Connolly found that working-class Irish Catholics and Irish-born commentators tended to be anti-war, while Australian-born middle-class Irish tended to be pro-war.³¹ The proliferation of imperial rhetoric may have been truly widespread, but this did not necessarily mean uncomplicated popular support of the empire. The rhetoric of imperial loyalty did, however, shape the articulation of Australian nationalism.

Emerging Australian nationalism

Australians in the South African War regularly deferred to imperial loyalty, but they also often expressed what they saw as distinctly Australian attributes. *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Frank Wilkinson wrote:

[The Australian soldier] is a tall, raw-boned, good-natured beggar; he can make tea in a period an ordinary man would be striking a match; he can ride horses that tie themselves up into knots and buck with great suddenness and power; he can swear so that I have seen regular Tommies [British soldiers] stand agape in awesome admiration. With a sick comrade he is tender as a child; he is the sort of stuff that heroes are cut from.³²

²⁷R.C. Lewis, *On the Veldt: A plain narrative of service afield in South Africa*, (Hobart: J Walch and Sons, 1902), p. 136.

²⁸Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume I: The white man's world*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 225.

²⁹See, for example, Trainor, 'Building Nations: Australia and New Zealand', p. 257.

³⁰Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 10; C.N. Connolly, 'Class, birthplace, loyalty: Australian attitudes to the Boer War,' *Australian Historical Studies* 18, no. 71 (1978), p. 232.

³¹Connolly, 'Class, birthplace, loyalty', pp. 222–5.

³²Frank Wilkinson, *Australia at the Front: A colonial view of the Boer War*, (London: John Long, 1901), pp. 278–9.

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Portraying the Australian soldier as physically able, a natural soldier, proficient with horses, irreverently uncouth, and loyal to his mates, Wilkinson promulgated many of the aspects which would later form the key image of the 'Australian type'. Wilkinson was not alone in giving voice to these images.

Emphasising the Australian soldier's limited respect for authority, Abbott joked that:

'Looting' comes to him naturally, though apparently not quite so naturally as to the Canadian, who is the most accomplished 'looter' in all the world. This is a compliment which is none the less deserved because all looting was sternly forbidden by British authorities.³³

War correspondent A.G. Hales, highlighting the Australian tendency to always fight for one's mates, wrote:

every time the coo-ee rang out over the whispering veldt the Australians turned in their saddles, and riding as the men from the South-land can ride, they dashed to the rescue, and did not leave a single man in the hands of the enemy.³⁴

These characteristics were inextricable from the imagination of the Australian bush, and the kinds of skills and qualities it was said to have inculcated in Australians:

It was felt that the men were truly representative and characteristic of the Colonies. They were Australians of the Bush – squatters, boundary-riders, shepherds, shearers, and prospectors, sent out largely by Australian money, and followed by Australian hopes and ambitions.³⁵

Many of these characteristics were eventually developed in other contexts, solidifying their place in popular images of Australianness. Australia's First World War official historian Charles Bean, for instance, wrote:

like colonists of all ages, the Australian came of a race whose tradition was one of independence and enterprise, and, within that race itself, from a stock more adventurous, and for the most part physically more strong, than the general run of men. ... the people developed more fully the large frames which seem normal

³³Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 13.

³⁴Hales, *Campaign Pictures*, p. 67.

³⁵James Green, *The Story of the Australian Bushmen (being notes of a chaplain)*, (Sydney: William Brooks & Co., 1903), p. 3.

to Anglo-Saxons living under generous conditions. An active life, as well as the climate, rendered the body wiry and the face lean, easily lined, and thin-lipped.³⁶

In his study of the persistent strength of such images, Russel Ward wrote fifty years later in his nationalist classic, *The Australian Legend*:

According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser ... He swears hard and consistently ... He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin....³⁷

The strands of these images flow through clearly: the Australian soldier in the South African War was the quintessence of Australian masculinity. As Bill Nasson remarks, 'for Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, empire military involvement watered the ground for those Dominion myths of masculine war sacrifice and national identity which were to ripen in the Great War'.³⁸

Yet many of the tropes that Australians articulated in the South African War were still only proto-nationalistic. Colonial parochialism undermined the expression of Australian nationalism by making expressions of identity either too specific or too generalised. When it was too specific, some soldiers expressed their loyalty not so much to Australia, but to their own colony. Captain Richard Lewis, the commanding officer of the Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen, reflected on a particularly proud moment, marching past Lord Roberts, commander-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa: 'You will understand that this march past was made particularly pleasant to us in several ways. We marched as Tasmanians, and not as Australians merely'.³⁹ Other soldiers often referenced tensions between different units from the Australian colonies; the Victorian Colonel Tom Price suggested, 'The intercolonial jealousies of Australia no doubt, had a great deal to do with the question of dealing with the Australian troops'.⁴⁰ Peter Stanley cites this factor as one reason why the South African War did not become a defining moment for Australian identity. Unlike the First World

³⁶C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, volume 1: The story of Anzac*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 5th ed., 1936), pp. 4–5.

³⁷Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 1–2.

³⁸Nasson, *The South African War 1899–1902*, pp. 7–8.

³⁹Lewis, *On the Veldt*, p. 75.

⁴⁰Colonel Tom Price CB, 2nd Victorian Mounted Rifles, papers, AWM: 3DRL/1436, p. 30.

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War, in which Australians fought as part of a defined, unified Australia and a cohesive fighting force, Australian soldiers in the South African War were invested in their colonial identities, and indeed, the majority of them fought in colonial contingents.⁴¹

Yet, Australian proto-nationalism could also be too broadly defined, with many characteristics understood as defining colonials more generally. The iconic image in Figure 3 is from Frank Wilkinson's account of the war, depicting an effete British intelligence officer juxtaposed with his masculine colonial counterpart.⁴² Abbott remarked on the 'ruddy, smooth-faced, flaxen Englishmen beside our lantern-jawed, long-limbed, bark-featured Cornstalks' shown in this image, but he also noted that 'you will never have the least difficulty in distinguishing a Colonial from an Englishman of England'.⁴³ It should not be forgotten that Wilkinson's original caption for the sketch contrasts the imperial intelligence officer with his 'colonial' counterpart – not specifically an Australian.

⁴¹Peter Stanley, 'With Banjo to Kimberley: Banjo Paterson's South African War verse as history,' in Dennis and Grey (eds.), *The Boer War*.

⁴²Wilkinson, *Australia at the Front*, p. 242.

⁴³Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, pp. 214–15.



Figure 3 – Two types: imperial and colonial intelligence officer⁴⁴

Abbott – whose book *Tommy Cornstalk* exemplified many of these recognisably Australian traits – also noted that the Australian ‘is pretty much, though not quite, of the same species as the Canadian’.⁴⁵ Similarly, the surname of his archetypal Australian, Cornstalk, was noted to have specific origins in New South Wales, rather than the

⁴⁴AWM: ART19683.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 6.

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members of the other states, such as the Victorian 'Gum-suckers'.⁴⁶ To this extent, the notion of being Australian existed in a liminal space between broader identifications as colonials and narrower ones related to the constitutive colonies of Australia.

Different modes of proto-nationalism were, however, ultimately underpinned by Britishness. In articulating the distinction between two modes of Australian nationalism – Anglo-Australian imperialism against a more independent Australianness – Neville Meaney suggested that their differences were political by nature (such as the status of Australia and its role in determining imperial policy), rather than cultural.⁴⁷ Echoing this notion, John Hirst argued that part of the reason for a resurgence in imperial enthusiasm following the Queen's jubilee celebrations was a reduced 'uncertainty about the relationship between nation and Empire', and that wariness of the empire, when it was prevalent, was not driven by a 'determined anti-British stance'.⁴⁸ Australia's relationship with the imperial centre was frequently described in the language of family metaphors, suggestive of the 'crimson threads of kinship' so integral to race thinking in this period. Rudyard Kipling, for example, presented Australia as a new martial queen, taking her side next to the old queen of Britain.⁴⁹

These British underpinnings of proto-Australian nationalism permeate contemporary sources. In a poem transcribed by Private Otto Tchow, Australian bravery is the continuation of the qualities of the British race, expressed through familial, masculine language:

And could you think we forget brave sons.
...
When to the Boers the courage they displayed
Proved that Australia's sons upon the field
Were of the old stock – Never known to yield.
...
And they're worthy the name of Britons,
Of being some of the lion's sons

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁷Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity: the problem of nationalism in Australian history and historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 32, iss. 116 (2001), pp. 76–90.

⁴⁸John Hirst, 'Empire, state, nation', in Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (eds.), *Australia's Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 153.

⁴⁹John Hirst, 'Blooding the nation: the Boer War and Federation', in Dennis and Grey (eds.), *The Boer War*.

Ready, and steady, and willing
When facing the foeman's guns.⁵⁰

Another poem, 'The call to arms', which begins Chaplain James Green's account of travelling to the front with Bushmen contingents, also foregrounds the racial link connecting colonial nationalism with imperial loyalty:

Blood is thicker than water,
and that within our veins,
Is the same that makes the pulses beat
On broad Australian plains;
The same that warms Canadian hearts,
In spite of winter snow;
The same that throbs in many a breast
Where tropic breezes blow.
Kindred in speech and race are we
With the Brothers that came from over the sea.⁵¹

In these passages, the connection between an emerging Australian nationalism and support for the British Empire are not mutually exclusive. Rather, national achievement on the battlefield in the name of the empire proved the racial lineage and legacy of Britishness. As Techow records, Australians had demonstrated that they were 'of the old stock' and worthy of being considered the lion's (i.e., Britain's) sons. As Green's choice of poem highlights, this sentiment connected white men across the globe – from 'broad Australian plains' to Canadian hearts in the 'winter snow'. As much as Australians liked to define themselves against the stereotypical British soldier in proto-nationalist language, these claims never formed expressions of anti-Britishness, nor repudiated the British foundations of Australian identity.

A Boer savage

Australian images of the Boer were largely consistent with those of British commentators, if not as regularly invoked. Positive representations of Boers, discussed below, often focused on those qualities of rural masculinity that suggested superficial similarities between Australian and Boer. Negative representations of Boers centred on their religiosity, ignorance, laziness and duplicitousness. Short but suggestive comments were often couched in the dichotomous language of 'savage' and 'civilised'.⁵²

⁵⁰Pte Otto Techow, 6th Western Australian Mounted Infantry, diary, AWM: 3DRL/2235, poem entitled 'Brakpan'.

⁵¹A.F.B. Wright, 'The Call to Arms', quoted in Green, *The Story of the Australian Bushmen*, p. 1.

⁵²Nasson, *The South African War 1899–1902*, pp. 242–5.

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Abbott referred to South Africa as 'wild, in its half-savage black population, and its almost as half-savage white one'.⁵³ His suggestion echoed that of Hales, who described the Boers as the 'sons of semi-white savages'.⁵⁴ Claude Lenthall, a Sydneysider living in South Africa at the outbreak of war, used the same words to describe Boers in a letter to his brother.⁵⁵ Descriptions such as this positioned Boers as a people who had not attained the full level of civilisation which the British Empire was thought to epitomise. The logic of imperial and settler-colonial conquest duly followed: Boer-owned land thus became fair game for the civilising effects of British possession.

Explicit instances of 'civilisational' rhetoric show how this relation was understood by ordinary soldiers. In the early part of the war, Trooper Robert Hayward of the South Australian Bushmen asserted that 'the Boer is dirty and untidy in his habits caring nothing about civilization', and that, much to the Boers' chagrin, they would 'now have to settle side by side with the British and will be able to enjoy the liberty and freedom which British rule gives to all mankind'.⁵⁶ At much the same time in the campaign, Trooper Watson Steel of New South Wales commented that the land around Bloemfontein could be far more agriculturally productive 'under a proper system of culture', that is, once British settlers had taken it.⁵⁷ Similar attitudes persisted at the conclusion of the war. Hales linked Boer laziness and religiosity with an inefficacy as colonisers. He claimed that a Boer would 'much rather sit down and pray for a beautiful harvest than get up and work for it'.⁵⁸

Some Australian commentators linked the trope of the lazy Boer with combat ineffectiveness. In July 1900, Banjo Paterson claimed that Boers were so lazy, they would not engage in night attacks:

The fact is they are too lazy; they have never done any unpleasant work – when any hard work presents itself, all their lives they have been accustomed to send a native to do it. So now, when they might cut us up seriously by night attacks, they prefer to go to bed.⁵⁹

⁵³ Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Hales, *Campaign Pictures*, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Quoted in R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1976), p. 37.

⁵⁶ Trooper Robert Hayward, 3rd South Australian Bushmen, memoir, AWM: PR00996, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁷ Trooper Watson Steel, 1st New South Wales Mounted Rifles, manuscript, AWM: 3DRL/2851, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Hales, *Campaign Pictures*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Droogleever (ed.), *From the Front*, p. 409.

The belief in a lazy Boer enemy, if indeed widely held, could have disastrous results. At Wilmansrust in June 1901, a year after Paterson's claim was printed, Victorian soldiers at a poorly picketed camp were surprised by a Boer night attack in which eighteen Victorians were killed.⁶⁰

Boers were said to be deceitful too, which was linked to their military abilities. Fundamentally, the charge of deceitfulness was borne of the frustrations of a conventional British force fighting Boer commandos that deployed hit-and-run tactics. Exemplars of this trope often related to Boer abuse of white flags, but there were other, more individualised tales of deception.⁶¹ In December 1899, an Australian cavalryman complained about the difficulty the British had in meeting the Boer on the battlefield: 'They fight when they like and leave off when they like'.⁶² Queensland soldier Herbert Conder wrote that, 'the Boers are cunning devils, they go out fighting today, and tomorrow they plant their rifles and do a couple of days farming, then out they go again'.⁶³ New South Wales military chaplain James Green recounted that captured cities rapidly changed loyalty: 'To-day you can see a portrait of 'Bobs' on a background formed of a draped Union Jack, to-morrow Kruger looks at you ... It is this want of honesty which makes it difficult to deal with the Boer'.⁶⁴ Boer deceitfulness was also understood to run both ways. In a letter home, Trooper Norman Gavin of New South Wales related that captured Boer combatants would immediately reveal the location of armament caches and supplies. 'They are awful traitors', he concluded.⁶⁵

The contemporary prevalence of these cultural images is also evident in attempts to repudiate them. Paterson remarked that, 'all the talk about Boers being savages is nonsense', and Hales noted, 'We were led by members of this [Intelligence] Department to believe that the Boer was a cowardly kind of veldt pariah, a degenerate offshoot of a fine old parent stock ... [but the Boer] is nothing of the kind'.⁶⁶ Abbott reflected that 'books, and magazines, and newspapers had almost taught us to believe

⁶⁰Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo*, pp. 55–71; and see Cameron Ross, 'The Wilmansrust affair', *Wartime* 60 (Spring 2012), pp. 30–31.

⁶¹See, for example, Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 101; Droogleever (ed.), *From the Front*, p. 53.

⁶²Private Michael Commins', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 9 February 1900, p. 6: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article237166924>. Accessed 3 December 2020.

⁶³Trooper Herbert Conder, 3rd Queensland Mounted Infantry, diary, AWM: PR84/131, p. 15.

⁶⁴Green, *The Story of the Australian Bushmen*, p. 132. 'Bobs' refers to Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in South Africa in 1900.

⁶⁵'At the front', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 23 November 1901, p. 2: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article72498173>. Accessed 3 December 2020.

⁶⁶Droogleever (ed.), *From the Front*, p. 30; Hales, *Campaign Pictures*, p. 55.

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that we should meet in Africa some kind of a sub-tropical Esquimo – a hairy, primitive “loafer”, but that on first seeing Boer prisoners and discovering ordinary men, he was left with ‘a curious feeling of having been deceived’.⁶⁷ By virtue of requiring repudiation, these sources suggest that representations of the Boers as lazy and deceitful were probably widespread.

Repudiated or otherwise, however, representations of Boers never truly denied their whiteness, but did hold them to a standard of whiteness that they could not always be assumed to meet. As Abbott asserted in a passage exemplary of the rather arbitrary distinctions drawn between bushman and Boer, ‘We are certainly no better in most things than we ought to be, but, if only as policy, we *do* deal more with truthfulness than do the Boers’.⁶⁸ It is in this sense that Schwarz remarks, ‘Boers could occupy a place in the ethnic scheme [only] on the outer edges of whiteness’.⁶⁹

Playing the Boers at their own game

In articulating the colonial rationale for sending the ‘Bushmen’ contingents, Reverend Green repeated a common belief that the best way for the British to beat the formidable Boer enemy was to send soldiers who most resembled them.⁷⁰ Australian Bushmen soldiers, so it was thought, could ‘play the Boers at their own game’.⁷¹ Abbott articulated this notion even more cogently, declaring:

From the history of the Dutch people in South Africa – their hardships and struggles as pioneers in the first place, and their open-air, half-civilised existence nowadays – it was, from the outbreak of hostilities, a matter of universal opinion throughout the Colonies that the Boer should be met by men who resembled him in their ways of living, in their training as horsemen, and, more particularly, in their education as expert rifle shots.⁷²

If Australians resembled the Boers in their way of living, then it followed that the Australian existence must also be an ‘open-air, half-civilised’ one. But although Abbott denied an Australian–Boer connection in terms of vice, the same was not true for representations of Australian skill and virtue. Indeed, in a number of instances, it was

⁶⁷Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, pp. 237, 240.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁹Schwarz, *Memories of Empire*, p. 229.

⁷⁰See Peter Bakker and Thomas J. Rogers, ‘Dismantling a myth of the South African War: Bushmen, Aboriginal trackers, and public debate, 1899–1902’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 21 (2019), pp. 154–6; 160–61.

⁷¹Green, *The Story of the Australian Bushmen*, p. 2.

⁷²Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 7.

precisely by drawing upon popular images of the Boer on the veld that the extent of Australians' natural martial potential could be articulated.

Horsemanship is perhaps the paradigmatic example, because it linked supposed Australian expertise, disdain for the average British soldier, and images of the Boer soldier. Contending that the horse was a defining characteristic of the Australian experience, Abbott likened the Australian to the Boer:

As the Boer despises a 'voet-looper' ['foot-slogger'] so is Tommy Cornstalk ashamed to be seen walking. He is essentially a horseman – and generally a horsey man. His sphere as a soldier lies in mounted work ...⁷³

Paterson provided a similar analogy, albeit through the words of British officers, who were supposedly in disbelief that the Australians they were assigned did not resemble the Boer so closely as they had imagined:

[The Australian Bushmen] are a rough lot of diamonds to look at, but the English officers say that 'they are not real bushmen, don't you know'. I fancy their idea of a bushman is much like our old idea of a Boer – a sort of hairy savage who lives on horseback, and they don't think the men they have got are wild enough to be the real thing.⁷⁴

Paterson's claim was closely tied to another popular Australian notion about the inefficacy of the average British soldier. Private Frederick Cawthorn, for example, wrote in dismay that, 'Our horses, the best that have arrived from Australia are likely to carry the next lot of Tommies, who don't know a horse from a bar of soap, to the front'.⁷⁵ The significance of horses in Australian South African War writings reflects the empirical reality that this was a war in which horses were indispensable, but also the fact that horses and horsemanship became symbols that were used to navigate expressions of similarity and difference.⁷⁶ If the Australians could beat the Boers at their own game, it was not simply because the Australian was a skilled horseman, but because he was as skilled as the Boer.

Settling the question of Bushman or Boer

The blurring of the categories, Australian bushman and Boer soldier, cannot be properly understood without exploring the role of broader conceptual frameworks

⁷³Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁴Droogleever (ed.), *From the Front*, p. 415.

⁷⁵Private Frederick Cawthorn, 2nd Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen, diary, AWM: PR86/056, transcript p. 13.

⁷⁶See Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, pp. 131–41.

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dominant in the Anglo settler colonies at the turn of the twentieth century. 'Horsiness', for instance, took on symbolic importance not merely out of empirical necessity, but also in relation to the emerging Australian identity of the bush. In one historian's summary of the minds of nineteenth-century writers, it was 'in the back country that the most profound modification of British stock was occurring, where a distinct and superior national type was forming'.⁷⁷ The imagined bush, in turn, was inextricable from the context of settler colonialism and the settler colonist – it was precisely because of the conditions of the Australian colonies that it could be said that Australians were an improvement of the 'Anglo-Saxon stock'.⁷⁸

The context of settler colonialism became explicit in the comparison of the Australian bushman and the Boer soldier. In praising mounted infantry above the more glamorous cavalry, for instance, Wilkinson suggested that, '[the Australians] farm and fight with equal facility, and do both with more thoroughness than their South African prototypes', indicating that it was not only martial aptitude, but the ability to develop land that marked out the Australians particularly for admiration.⁷⁹

By contrast, when comparing the Boers to the English, Captain Joseph Dallimore suggested that it was the Boers who were more praiseworthy, noting:

The English settlers expect to be spoon fed by the B.S.A. Coy [British South Africa Company] but the Dutchmen look to their own efforts ... Melsetter is the most prosperous place in Rhodesia and is wholly a farming place and the population are all Boers. It is no wonder they are a hardy race, the difficulties they have had to contend with would have frightened any other race.⁸⁰

Such comments were, of course, antithetical to the notion of Boers being lazy or reliant on indigenous labour to develop the land. But these contestations in the discursive record were contradictory in detail, not in conceptual structure. Both claims – that the Boers were praiseworthy for their efficient colonisation, and that the Boers were blameworthy for being lazy and indolent – reflected a fundamental colonial assumption about the justifications of settler colonialism: namely, that the legitimacy of indigenous dispossession was contingent upon the act of taming the land and 'civilising' the local people. In this respect, the language of 'savage' and 'civilised', which

⁷⁷Douglas Cole, "The crimson thread of kinship": Ethnic ideas in Australia, 1870–1914,' *Australian Historical Studies* 14, no. 56 (1971), p. 520.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*; Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and identity 1688–1980*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981); Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, health, and racial destiny in Australia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005).

⁷⁹Wilkinson, *Australia at the Front*, p. 49.

⁸⁰Dallimore, diary, transcript book 2, p. 31.

couched many descriptions of the Boers, was not merely a quirky contextual detail, but revealing of some of the foundational concepts being mobilised to conceive of virtue and vice, superiority and inferiority, the bushman and the Boer.

The bush did not have to define the Australian experience in reality, in order for it to be of paramount symbolic importance. Graeme Davison has comprehensively demonstrated the 'urban context' of many of the bush legend's most ardent advocates, and Peter Stanley notes that despite rapidly becoming 'one of the world's most highly urbanised countries, the image of the bushman – and from the South African War the bushman soldier – became one of the dominant impressions of Australians at war'.⁸¹ Banjo Paterson effectively embodied this contradiction when he recounted in his memoir, *Happy Dispatches*, that:

I realized that they [his English interlocutors] looked upon me as the Wild Colonial Boy, the bronco buster from the Barcoo, and I determined to act up to it ... At that time I was a solicitor in practice in Sydney, rarely getting on a horse, but I told them that if I had a horse in Australia that wouldn't carry me a hundred miles in a day, I would give him to a Chinaman to draw a vegetable cart.⁸²

Empirical evidence bears out Paterson's point. Despite appearances and even unit names, probably only a minority of Australian soldiers in the war could be considered 'bushmen', that is, coming from a rural labouring background.⁸³ In this respect, the bush mythology which characterised Australian claims of racial difference (to the British) and similarity (to the Boers), paralleled the notion that this conflict was a 'white man's war' – it reflected rhetorical claims and a normative ideal, not empirical reality, as we discuss below.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, colonial Australian writers, artists, and legislators sought to define the 'coming Australian man', and fretted over whether he would be an improvement on his Anglo-Saxon forebears, or a degeneration.⁸⁴ In these debates, colonial masculinities were interconnected with white Britishness.⁸⁵ At the

⁸¹ Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the bush: an urban context for the Australian legend,' *Australian Historical Studies* 18, no. 71 (1978), pp. 191–209; Stanley, 'With Banjo to Kimberley', p. 162.

⁸² Droogleever, *From the Front*, p. 22.

⁸³ Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 327; Chamberlain, 'The characteristics of Australia's Boer War volunteers', p. 48.

⁸⁴ White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. 64–7; Cole, "'The crimson thread of kinship'", p. 518.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Angela Woollacott, *Gender and Empire*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 59–80.

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same time, emerging scientific discourses of race were married to earlier ideas about civilisation and widely debated.⁸⁶ By the time war broke out in 1899, settler Australians had a ready vocabulary with which to assert and elaborate perceived differences between themselves and colonial others.⁸⁷ In the British settler colonies, the concept of whiteness was in the ascendant. Whiteness transcended nationalism: ideas about it were repeated, shared and developed in multiple sites across the British Empire and beyond.⁸⁸

The South African War has often been understood as a 'white man's war', a description that was contemporary.⁸⁹ The common fear among Boers and Britons was that enlisting black combatants would upset the basis of white supremacy in South Africa. The Natal government feared that engaging black combatants 'would give them a false idea of their own powers and establish a sense of independence among them'.⁹⁰ The *Times* historian of the war Leo Amery declared in 1902 that enlisting black soldiers would threaten 'European civilisation in South Africa'.⁹¹ Boer leaders held similar fears. In January 1902, Jan Smuts argued that 'the interests of self-preservation no less than the cause of civilisation in South Africa' demanded that black people not be drawn into the war between self-appointed colonial masters – indeed that this common understanding was 'the cardinal principle in South African politics'.⁹²

Against this rhetoric, decades of research have shown conclusively that it was not a white man's war.⁹³ The British enlisted black, coloured, and Asian auxiliaries and

⁸⁶See, for example, Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 45; Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*; Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth*, (London: Routledge, 2nd ed., 2005), pp. 30–1.

⁸⁷Georgia Ramsay, 'Australians and Black South Africans during the South African War, 1899–1902', Australian War Memorial Summer Scholar paper, 2000, AWM: MSS2071, p. 1; Karageorgos, 'War in a "white man's country"'.
⁸⁸Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*.

⁸⁹Warwick, *Black People and the South African War*, p. 6.

⁹⁰Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹¹Leo Amery, *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902*, vol. 2, (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1902), p. 138.

⁹²Quoted in Warwick, *Black People and the South African War*, p. 18.

⁹³See, for example, *ibid.*; Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War*; Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh, and Mary-Lynn Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899–1902*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 18.

combatants in increasing numbers as the war went on.⁹⁴ Despite a fundamental opposition to arming black people, Boer forces also enlisted a small number of black combatants during the war, usually in rear areas or for reconnaissance. The Boers deployed a larger number of black and coloured people as wagon-drivers, mounted attendants (*agterryers*), and labourers.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Pervasive structures of colonial thought were not unique to Australian representations of the Boer. It was, after all, a common imputation in British propaganda that the Boers were undeserving colonists because of their overly cruel treatment of indigenous African peoples, as opposed to the putatively free and just regime of the British.⁹⁶ In locating the Australian representation of the Boer within this broader framework of settler colonialism, we have attempted to push scholarship on the South African War into some of the transnational considerations which are indispensable for understanding national histories.

Underpinning the categories of bushman or Boer were broader considerations about race and civilisation that were weaponised and developed in a context that extended far beyond Australia's borders. Thinking about the South African War in this way opens up new lines of scholarly enquiry for Australian historians, not only in relation to under- or unexplored dimensions of the war, but also in relation to Australian society. The 1890s and 1900s were politically and culturally foundational for modern Australia. A greater understanding of the impact of the South African War on Australia promises to yield further insights into these foundational conditions, and thereby illuminate our understanding of Australian society today.

2002); André Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: White man's war, black man's war, traumatic war*, (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2011).

⁹⁴Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902*, p. 102.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 105–7.

⁹⁶See, for example, Trainor, 'Building Nations: Australia and New Zealand', p. 255.