Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire

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A Century of Wrong as Anti-imperial Tract, Core Narrative of the Afrikaner “Nation,” and Victim-Based Solidarity-Building Discourse

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Globally the most influential thing about *A Century of Wrong*, published in October 1899 as a quasi-official justification for the South African Republic’s (SAR) declaration of war, may well have been its title. All too obviously, the publication itself served as a polemical tract in the lopsided conflict between imperial Britain and the puny Boer republics. But the title spoke to larger issues of global concern that had also been at the heart of the Hague Peace Conference a few months earlier.

From 18 May to 29 July 1899, 108 delegates from twenty-six countries, including all the European great powers and the United States as well as China and Turkey, met in the capacious setting of the Dutch Summer Palace in the Hague. As a “peace” conference it was, for the most part, an anomaly: it served as little more than a public forum for unvarnished assertions of great power interests and imperial ambitions. Implicitly, though, the conference also responded to dimly perceived threats to the enduring sway of this imperial order. The assembled delegates and assorted members of international high society found that they could not ignore the outpouring
of public enthusiasm for the noble purposes of a peace conference occasioned by Tsar Nicholas II’s call for a curb on the ever more ominous international arms race. As Barbara Tuchman relates in The Proud Tower, the skeptical and cynical delegates “became interested in spite of themselves.”

The outcomes, in the form of the first Hague Conventions, remained meager and of little avail. Within three months, the military might of the British Empire was unleashed on the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Free State. In this confrontation with socially backward agrarian communities, the British Empire claimed to represent progress and modern civilization. Chamberlain and Milner and their high command confidently expected an easy war; once the imperial army was in place, the war would be concluded in six months, perhaps even by Christmas. For his part the SAR state attorney, Jan Christiaan Smuts, believed that the British Empire was a ramshackle structure. The empire held sway over great countries largely inhabited by antagonistic peoples and, in Smuts’s view, its dominium rested more on prestige and moral intimidation than on true military strength. Nothing came of Smuts’s expectations that the war might instigate uprisings in India and other parts of the empire, but in South Africa itself it did prove an unexpectedly protracted conflict. When Generals Roberts and Kitchener resorted to “scorched earth” policies to counter Boer guerrilla warfare, with concentration camps to confine women and children, resulting in massive civilian casualties, Britain stood accused, both in England itself and before the “civilized” world, of employing “methods of barbarism.”

In the end the republics were defeated, but at considerable cost to the necessary prestige of the British Empire. Ironically, the need for something like the Hague Conventions, which had so readily been disregarded, now began to appear in a different light; the 1899 conference was followed by other conferences and conventions; and in retrospect the initial Hague Conventions proved to be the beginnings of modern international human rights law. In a final reversal, the international anti-apartheid movement, ironically mirroring the erstwhile pro-Boer movements, mobilized this international human rights discourse against the successor regime of the erstwhile Boer republics.

In this ambivalent context, the title of A Century of Wrong proved both apt and prescient. Actually “A Century of Wrong” was not the most obvious translation of the Dutch original, Een Eeuw van Onrecht. A literal translation would have been “A Century of Injustice” (used in the U.S., German, and French translations). As a title, “A Century of Wrong” announced a more
comprehensive moral indictment of imperial rule. This spoke to the popular expectations of “peace” as a humanitarian counterforce to the prevailing “realist” discourse in international politics. At the level of its title, then, *A Century of Wrong* was part of a global process through which the South African war became a humanitarian and human rights issue in Europe and beyond—while the imperial claims of “British justice” were severely dented. The domestic South African appeal of the publication’s contents, though, was another matter; these contributed to an emerging Afrikaner nationalist movement in ways that prefigured the subsequent confrontation of local apartheid policies with universalistic human rights norms.

*A Tract and Its Travels*

*A Century of Wrong* was a stridently anti-imperial tract: it provided a partisan survey of the origins and causes of the war with a view to harnessing both domestic and international support for the republican cause. Put together in short order and under great pressure on the very eve of the war, the publication was a patchwork of partisan exhortation, selective résumés of colonial and republican history, appeals to international conventions, excerpts from diplomatic correspondence, refutations of alleged Uitlander grievances couched in impassioned anti-capitalist and anti-jingoist rhetoric. For a time, the identity of the “author” of this tract was a matter of some controversy, with General Smuts as the prime suspect. The first printing, produced by the government printer in the typical style and format of official publications on 9 October 1899, only days before the SAR’s declaration of war, had been anonymous. For distribution purposes it was identified as “issued by” F. W. Reitz, the secretary of state and former president of the Orange Free State.¹ However, Reitz and his family disclaimed his connection and suggested that Smuts and J. de V. Roos had been responsible. Subsequently Smuts and Roos’s collaborative “authorship” has been confirmed by historians and archivists.²

But this may not be the right question. Significantly, neither Smuts nor Roos ever publicly asserted their authorship. Smuts, the architect of post-war “conciliation,” may well not have wanted to associate himself with a cause that had in the interim been taken up ever more exclusively by his nationalist opponents. It is less clear why Roos also kept quiet about his co-responsibility for what was after all a celebrated, if controversial, work. Perhaps appropriately for such a collaborative patchwork, *A Century of*
Wrong was a deliberately “anonymous” publication rather than the creation of particular “authors.”

As such tracts go, this one had an immediate and pervasive impact, globally even more than locally. This was more a function of its uses in and for the available networks of distribution provided by the various pro-Boer movements abroad than due to any careful designs on certain intended audiences. The text itself was emphatically addressed to “Brother African-ders!” and concluded with a rousing appeal invoking the slogan “Africa for the Africander.” Unlike “Boers” or “Burghers,” this might have been calculated to include Cape Afrikaners in a pan-Afrikaner ethnic appeal. But from the initial distribution of A Century of Wrong it does not appear that Cape Afrikaners had been a priority. Of the first batch to be printed, twelve were dispatched to the SAR’s representative in Brussels, ten to London, and six to the United States, with an English translation to follow in days. No mention is made of similar distribution efforts in the Cape. Already by early 1900 a second printing had appeared (with different editions published in London and the United States).\(^3\) These provided a key staple for the pro-Boer movements and international anti-imperialist campaigns mounted in Europe and the United States, not least in England itself.

However, there is little indication that A Century of Wrong was informed by a strategic notion of particular international audiences in its polemical targets. There was no attempt, for example, to highlight geopolitical issues that might be of particular interest to Germany, at the time Britain’s main rival. In this regard the Dutch case is even more surprising. The Netherlands was, of course, no great power, but ever since the 1881 revolt against the British annexation of the Transvaal there had been a substantial Dutch interest in their rediscovered ethnic kin (stamverwanten).\(^4\) A lively body of popular Dutch writings on the “Afrikaner Boers” typically played up a heroic vision of Boer resistance against British “tyranny,” viewed as a continuation of an eminently Dutch republican tradition. It would not have been difficult for a SAR propaganda offensive to tie into this. However, as we will see, any such Dutch-oriented perspective was notably absent from the historical narrative articulated in A Century of Wrong. Much the same applies to the various (actual and potential) pro-Boer constituencies in England, including some surprising alliances of, for example, liberal and feminist networks. Had these been in mind, it would have been strategic to avoid overt defenses of slavery and racial superiority, but these continued to feature prominently in A Century of Wrong. In short, the possible concerns of

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these pro-Boer movements (not to mention those in France, Russia, and further afield) cannot be said to have informed the publication’s working conception of its intended audience in any serious way. What we do find in the text, instead, is a rather abstract and vague notion of “the tribunal of an impartial history.”

What enabled this polemical tract to travel as far and wide as it did was access to the emerging networks of the various pro-Boer movements. In effect, these provided a tailor-made means for the tract’s dissemination. Conversely, it eminently served the immediate propagandistic and solidarity-building needs of these diverse pro-Boer movements. This was most conspicuously the case in the Netherlands, where by the advent of the South African War an effective network of cultural and commercial ties with the SAR had developed. The Dutch–South African Society (NZAV), founded in 1881, complemented by the General Dutch Union (ANV) and the Christian National Boer Committee, functioned in tandem with the propaganda efforts of the diplomatic representative of the SAR, Dr. Willem Leyds, a Dutchman who had held various high offices in the Transvaal administration. When the threats of imminent war began escalating in 1899, the NZAV organized a petition with some 140,000 signatories calling on the British people to prevent an unjust war; on Christmas Day 1899 Charles Boissevain, editor of the leading daily newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, published a front-page open letter to the Duke of Devonshire, and on 1 February 1900 Abraham Kuyper, who was shortly to become prime minister, published a celebrated disquisition, “La Crise Sud-Africaine,” in the journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*, which was promptly translated into English (running to no less than sixteen editions), Dutch, German, and Swedish. In this context the ANV readily supported publication of *Een Eeuw van Onrecht*, which quickly became one of the most famous pro-Boer publications in the Netherlands.

In Britain the various pro-Boer committees provided a similar network geared to the ready dissemination of material bearing on the South African War. Politically based in the radical wing of the opposition Liberal Party, the British pro-Boers also included a range of independent nonconformists, humanitarians, feminists, pacifists, anti-imperialists, and rationalists. In some ways this was a somewhat unlikely alliance. Liberals and radicals had been among the most vocal and persistent critics of Boer racial oppression, or “slavery.” But the Jameson Raid and other increasing evidence of Chamberlain and Milner’s imperialist agenda made them into active op-
ponents of the war. The key pro-Boer committees were only founded in 1899 as the threats of war rapidly gathered pace. Most conspicuous was the Stop-the-War Committee launched on Christmas Eve 1899 by W. T. Stead, indefatigable pioneer of the new mass journalism. Stead not only utilized his weekly *Review of Reviews* but also brought out a separate weekly magazine, *War against War in South Africa*. Within the year Stop-the-War had distributed millions of leaflets, posters, broadsheets, cartoons, and pamphlets. The various pro-Boer committees all sponsored private and public meetings while publishing and distributing an array of pamphlets and leaflets. Though the British pro-Boer movement proved politically rather ineffectual, it did provide a ready-made means for disseminating *A Century of Wrong*. The *Review of Reviews* published an English version with a preface by Stead himself (as well as a translation of Kuyper’s “La Crise Sud-Africaine”). Some two thousand copies of *A Century of Wrong* were produced at a cost of about £80.

Similar manifestations of pro-Boer interest and sentiment also proliferated in a range of other countries worldwide. In a sense the pro-Boer movement became nothing less than a global phenomenon. It is understandable that the anti-imperial Boer cause in the South African War evoked passionate interest from nationalists in Ireland and extended to the Flemish and to Germany. But it is surprising to what extent this was also the case in Scandinavia, Russia, Hungary, Italy, and the United States. In short order *A Century of Wrong* was translated and published not only in Dutch and English but also in German, French, Swedish, and Russian.5

So what was the international reception and legacy of *A Century of Wrong*? This presents us with a telling paradox. For despite its celebrity and wide distribution there are few traces of any definite impact or lasting significance, at least in this international context. Even in the more detailed accounts of the international propaganda war associated with the South African War we find virtually no specific references to *A Century of Wrong*. Actually this is not unusual for a polemical tract of this kind. Such tracts are not meant to be closely studied but to be passed on for immediate propaganda purposes. Evidently, the various pro-Boer movements found *A Century of Wrong* eminently serviceable. But by definition such polemical uses were also transient, leaving few traces beyond the context of the war itself. The only lasting legacy was the title, which did not vanish without a trace, like so much else pertaining to this erstwhile propaganda war of global dimensions. For other and subsequent movements of imperial resistance, the
title retained a kind of analogous relevance as a challenge to the waning moral claims of the British Empire. In the domestic South African context, though, *A Century of Wrong* did make a distinct and lasting contribution to the configuration of a resurgent Afrikaner nationalist movement in the longer term aftermath of the war.

*Narrating the (Afrikaner) Nation*

Whereas the polemics of *A Century of Wrong* were directed against the target of unjust imperial rule, the actual subject matter in the text also told a different kind of story. Implicitly and explicitly it took up the seminal concerns of an earlier tract *Wie zijn Wij?* (Who Are We?), the quasi-official SAR manifesto of the 1881 rebellion against the British annexation of the Transvaal. This had not been an introduction meant for some distant audience unfamiliar with the local population. Instead it represented the beginnings of an exercise in self-fashioning and solidarity-building, constructing the Afrikaner “nation” (fragmented as this still was in terms of Transvaal Boers, republican burghers, Cape Afrikaners) by telling a particular version of its history.

Expressions of an “Afrikaner” historical consciousness emerged by the late 1870s in the dual context of the first Afrikaans language movement initiated by the Cape Genootskap vir Regte Afrikaners (GRA) and of popular resistance to the British annexation of the Transvaal in 1877. In this regard S. J. du Toit’s Afrikaans-language *Geskiedenis van Ons Land in die Taal van Ons Volk* (History of Our Country in the Language of Our People) (1877) represented a landmark. Over the following decade and more, though, such pan-Afrikaans historical consciousness effectively subsided, and the early accounts of Transvaal and Free State history (including the 1881 SAR manifesto) were mostly written by Hollanders. Only from 1896, following the Jameson Raid, did a marked pan-Afrikaans historical consciousness revive. This was also the context of *A Century of Wrong* in the even more charged circumstances at the advent of the South African War.

Though taking up the cause of the SAR, Smuts and Roos were both Cape Afrikaners, not Transvaal “Boers”; significantly, they were members of a new generation of university-educated and professionally qualified Afrikaners. Smuts had studied law at Cambridge and had entered Cape political life in 1895 as an ally of Cecil Rhodes before, disillusioned by the Jameson Raid, he relocated to the Transvaal. It was Roos who had a par-
ticular interest in Afrikaner history. Though not a trained historian, Roos took a passionate and sustained interest in archival and historical matters. During his first stay in the Transvaal, from 1890, he systematically interviewed survivors and descendants from the Trekker period in a proto–oral history project, reported extensively on the Paardekraal commemorations, and published a lecture titled “Dingaan’s Day: A History Written in Blood.” He tracked down key primary sources from the time of the Great Trek, such as the diary of Louis Trichardt, and ensured their preservation in the State Archive. Having returned to the Cape, he worked as research assistant for both of the main (and rival) archival historians, George MacCall Theal and Reverend H. C. V. Leibbrandt. If anyone was suited to produce an informed insider overview of Afrikaner history in short order, then that was “Jimmy” Roos. In the event, this also proved to be a seminal narrative of the Afrikaner “nation.”

The genealogy of the core narrative of the Afrikaner “nation” may be traced by comparing the historical section of A Century of Wrong with S. J. du Toit’s 1877 GRA History and the 1881 SAR manifesto. The GRA History’s stated aim had been to provide an inclusive history of “our (Afrikaans) people,” but it did not yet quite know how to go about this. Much of the book consisted of meandering descriptions featuring notable historical figures or telling episodes, with curious anecdotes and sententious reflections thrown in for good measure. It did not yet tell a coherent story linking the different times and settings involved as part of a collective experience. Not only did different parts deal with the Dutch period and that of British rule, but the parallel trajectories of the Dutch settlers and the French refugees were recounted in separate sections as well. Similarly, the later narrative of the “emigrant Boers” was itself dispersed into the various regional histories of Natal, the Free State, and Transvaal. While historical figures such as Van Riebeeck, Adam Tas, and Governor Tulbagh, or events like Slagtersnek and the Great Trek, were singled out for special notice, they also tended to get swamped in an indiscriminate account that gave equal prominence to anecdotes concerning minor figures and obscure happenings. Nor were key themes, such as the significance of Van Riebeeck’s prayer at the founding of the settlement, sufficiently sustained or developed to frame the narrative.

By comparison the 1881 SAR manifesto clearly highlighted “freedom” and “independence” as the objectives of the Transvaal resistance against British annexation, positing these as the underlying driving forces of a long
historical struggle. The current Transvaal rebellion was framed retrospectively as part of a common and enduring quest for republican liberties and self-rule. This enabled the 1881 manifesto to represent disparate historical events from Slagtersnek to the 1877 annexation of the Transvaal—all of which had also featured in the *GRA History*—as integral parts of a shared historical narrative, indeed of the longer history of Dutch and Protestant emancipatory struggle for religious freedom, civil liberties, and independence. Compared to the sometimes unfocused and aimlessly wandering narratives of the *GRA History*, this was a clear and purposefully structured epic of sustained national struggle in a quite different voice. Indeed, the 1881 SAR manifesto was written by Dr. E. J. P. Jorissen, a liberal Hollander, who had effectively appropriated the local Boer histories within the framework of contemporary Dutch cultural and political nationalism.

Coming to *A Century of Wrong*, the differences, even more than the similarities, are instructive. In line with the 1881 manifesto it agreed on republican independence as general objective. But there were some telling differences in its telling of the core narrative. The familiar series of key episodes—from Slagtersnek through the Great Trek to the founding of the republics, with the story now extended to the more recent Jameson Raid as well—was set out in a clear and tight narrative structure. But, unlike the 1881 version, this was not located in the context of Dutch cultural and political history. Significantly, the story was only taken up from the beginnings of British occupation, effectively leaving out the period of Dutch colonial rule. And so its core narrative did not start in 1652 with Van Riebeeck (who was not even mentioned) but with Slagtersnek in 1815.

What this implied was that the story of the Afrikaner/“Boer” political struggle essentially related to the British imperial context rather than to Dutch cultural-political history. Unlike the 1881 SAR manifesto, *A Century of Wrong* did not invoke any independent (i.e., Dutch) source of legitimacy and authority; it posed an internal challenge to British rule in terms of its own basic values and professed commitments: “History will show convincingly that the pleas of humanity, civilisation, and equal rights, upon which the British Government bases its actions, are nothing else but the recrudescence of that spirit of annexation and plunder which has at all times characterised its dealings with our people.”6 Paradoxically, the very challenge to British imperial power invoked the rights and liberties supposed to have been extended to (British) subjects but consistently denied to them in practice.
This narrow focus on those episodes and developments that demonstrated the Afrikaner/“Boer” experience of British (in)justice resulted in the telling omissions of some major historical developments not recognized as key events in the story of the Afrikaner “nation.” Thus, the history of colonial Afrikaners in the Cape after the Great Trek was wholly ignored. Neither the continuing wars on the Cape Colony’s eastern frontier in the 1840s and 1850s, nor the Anti-Convict Agitation on the eve of the granting of a Constitution and representative government to the Cape Colony, both of which featured extensively in the *Gra History*, were even mentioned. Only passing mention was made of the Highveld conflicts with the Ndebele, such as the battle of Vegkop, or the Basotho wars (except to protest the unwarranted and partisan interventions by the British); but the 1848 battle of Boomplaats, with the British forces of Sir Harry Smith featured prominently (including an impassioned account of the execution of Thomas Dreyer as nothing less than a murder, “to the shame of English reputation”). The core narrative of *A Century of Wrong* concluded that with the Jameson Raid “we see to what a depth the old great traditions of British Constitutionalism had sunk” while unintentionally serving to bring about the awakening of “the national heart of Africanderdom.”

This core narrative would function as a template for the articulation and further development of postwar Afrikaner nationalism. In F. A. van Jaarsveld’s judgment, *A Century of Wrong* remained the foundation of Afrikaner-nationalist historical consciousness until the founding of the Republic in 1961. Of course this template was also revised, not least because it had to accommodate the course and outcome of the South African war itself. But in an important sense it had already prepared the way for the postwar understanding and interpretation of such key features as the suffering and mass deaths of Afrikaner women and children in the concentration camps.

*An Atrocity Narrative: The Legend and Shadow of Slagtersnek*

The core narrative of Afrikaner history in *A Century of Wrong* was not merely a neutral framing. It articulated a distinctive perspective, one rooted in a discourse of political grievances, indeed of national victimization by British imperial power. At the time this was not the only narrative framing available, as may be illustrated with reference to some contemporary responses by Boer leaders to the imminent threats of war. Thus in August 1899 General Piet Joubert, as commander-in-chief of the SAR, published...
an open letter (in English) to Queen Victoria (instantly translated and published in the Netherlands). In it he compared the Voortrekkers with the people of Israel, “chosen by God to establish their republics in the middle of the African ‘wilderness’ to bring ‘civilisation’ here.”9 At about the same time the SAR secretary of state, F. W. Reitz, wrote a letter to his counterpart in the Orange Free State, replete with biblical metaphors and analogies and prophesying that God would be on the side of the Boers and help them withstand the imperial forces on the battlefield.10 What is striking, when one compares A Century of Wrong to these contemporary responses, is the absence of similar biblical language and allusions and of any “chosen people” notion. Distinctive to A Century of Wrong was its resolutely secular approach and implicitly “modern” perspective. Unlike other Boer spokesmen and leaders, or President Paul Kruger himself, Smuts and Roos did not set out to counter the threats of British imperial power and of international mining capital with an archaic or Old Testament worldview; their charge was that the British Empire in its dealings with the Afrikaners/Boers was betraying its own professed standards of “justice,” “rights,” and “civilisation.”

However, in representing the republics in this way as “victims of British justice,” they also tapped into a popular discourse of national victimization. In particular, A Century of Wrong drew on the communal memories that had grown up around the legend of Slagtersnek and the “invented traditions” of the “Dingaan’s Day” and Paardekraal public commemorations. It was this distinctive discourse of secular victim-based solidarity-building that would prove to be of special significance for the development of an Afrikaner civil mythology during the opening decades of the twentieth century.

A Century of Wrong thus represented the history of the Afrikaners/Boers not as a national epic but as part of a popular grievance discourse. As such, its litany of historical grievances was laced with elements of an atrocity narrative, above all the legend of Slagtersnek. The story of Slagtersnek had already had a strange career (which would continue long after A Century of Wrong).11 The Bezuidenhout rebellion of 1815 had indeed been an episode of some historical significance. In the context of the closing frontier, with the new British administration attempting to establish a measure of law and order, and even some elements of the rule of law, the stakes were not insignificant. The court handed down an unprecedented number of death sentences to the main culprits; despite pleas for clemency, the governor confirmed that the capital punishment of six rebels should proceed. The outcome was traumatic for all concerned. At the public execution the ropes
of all but one of the condemned broke; to the assembled onlookers this appeared as a divine intervention of some kind, but despite their desperate pleas for a reprieve, the execution was harshly enforced as a lesson in the meaning of “British justice.”

Even so, popular memories of Slagtersnek soon faded: significantly, Slagtersnek was not mentioned among the grievances given as “reasons” for the Great Trek a generation later, nor did associates and descendants of the Slagtersnek rebels seem to figure much among the Trekkers. The story of Slagtersnek first surfaced in print in the five lectures on the “Emigration of the Dutch Farmers,” given by Justice Henry Cloete in Pietermaritzburg in the 1850s. Cloete was a member of one of the most prominent (and anglicized) Cape Dutch families. As a young man attached to the first Circuit Court on the frontier, he had personally witnessed some of the events associated with the Bezuidenhout rebellion and later acted as the British emissary in enforcing the 1842 British annexation of Natal despite Trekker protests. His first lecture prominently included a dramatic account of the botched execution. In this first lecture, Cloete also recounted that in 1843–1844 influential Trekkers in Natal insistently assured him: “We can never forget Slachters Nek.” However, this revival of the story of Slagtersnek may have had as much or more to do with Cloete’s own memories of these dramatic events than with the living memories of the Bezuidenhouts or other Trekkers. What is clear, though, is that Cloete’s “Lecture” was the primary source on which both Theal (1874) and S. J. du Toit in the 1877 History relied for their accounts of Slagtersnek, which in turn became the main sources for the late nineteenth-century proliferation of the legend of Slagtersnek: “Practically every history book in Afrikaans of the time featured the Slagtersnek episode prominently. . . . The unfortunate men of Slagtersnek had been transformed into ‘martyrs’ for Afrikaans freedom and victims of ‘British cruelty.’”

An extraordinary public cult then developed around the legend of Slagtersnek in the immediate aftermath of the Jameson Raid (1896). Nor was this only a matter of popular feelings. The SAR commissioned J. W. G. Van Oordt to produce an official history, while the Cape parliament commissioned its archivist, Reverend H. C. V. Leibbrandt, to publish all archival documents relating to Slagtersnek. Commandant Henning Pretorius, commander of the SAR State Artillery, even went to the Eastern Cape on a quest to recover the beam of the actual gallows used at Slagtersnek (but unfortunately died before he could complete his mission). Meanwhile in
Johannesburg a lynching party had been mobilized to string up the captured Jameson raiders on this beam of the Slagtersnek gallows. When Lionel Phillips and three other leaders of the Jameson Raid were convicted and sentenced to death by a SAR court, this was popularly interpreted as nothing less than a historic retribution for Slagtersnek. However, in the face of outraged public opinion, President Kruger commuted the death sentences, claiming that he did not want to repeat that atrocity of “British justice,” so putting the English nation to shame.14 Somehow Slagtersnek had become a potent symbol of the meaning of “British justice” for these crisis times, one that could be turned against the empire itself.

But just what was it about the legend of Slagtersnek that so aroused Afrikaner popular feelings on the eve of the South African War? At this time the crux of the Slagtersnek legend was not yet the earlier Bezuidenhout rebellion, as it would become in early twentieth-century Afrikaner-nationalist versions of the Slagtersnek narrative, but the botched execution. Significantly, in his account of Slagtersnek in De Afrikaner-Boer en de Jameson-Invall (The Afrikaner Boer and the Jameson Raid, 1896), Nico Hofmeyr rejected the proposal to erect a monument for the Slagtersnek rebels and distanced himself from this “abominable history” that had become such a “rock of offence” to Afrikaners, commenting that it did not reflect well on either Boer or Brit.15 It was not the rebellion as such, and even less its cause, that lived in Afrikaner memories but the terrible fate of the five convicted. At a human level the traumatic story—of the gallows ropes breaking and the men then being strung up again one after the other with the only piece of sound rope available, despite the most desperate pleas for clemency—obviously raised basic issues of “justice” and “mercy.” The main thrust of the story of Slagtersnek, though, was not that the conviction of the rebels had been a miscarriage of justice. But for the breaking of the gallows rope, “justice” would have been done to the rebels and accepted as such all round. The outrage was that when the gallows rope did break—in some fateful intervention—the death sentences were still enforced, despite the most desperate pleas for mercy. That could not be “justice,” or if it was, then “justice” itself was an outrage against humanity. If such a brutal execution was an instance of “British justice,” then the horror of the event revealed it to be nothing but the exercise of brute and merciless power.16

And so A Century of Wrong referred to Slagtersnek as an atrocity committed in the name of the law: “The horrible occurrence of the 9th of March 1816, when six of the Boers were half hung up in the most inhuman way in
the compulsory presence of their wives and children. Their death was truly horrible . . . and the eyes of posterity still glance back shudderingly through the long vista of years at that tragedy of horror.” As the opening episode in the narrative of a “century of wrong,” the function of this atrocity story of Slagtersnek was that it revealed “British justice” as a hypocritical mask for brutal repression: “This was, however, but the beginning. Under the cloak of religion British administration continued to display its hate against our people and nationality, and to conceal its self-seeking aim under cover of the most exalted principles.”

As an atrocity story, the botched Slagtersnek execution may be compared with a similar but less renowned episode in the national narrative set out in A Century of Wrong: that of the battle of Boomplaats and the fate of Thomas Dreyer. Unlike the Bezuidenhouts, Dreyer has disappeared as a historical figure from post-nineteenth-century histories. The significance of the otherwise obscure Dreyer becomes clearer when we refer to the account of Boomplaats provided in the 1877 GRA History. According to this account, Dreyer had not been a combatant at all but was a local simpleton who—on foot, unarmed, and barely clothed—had unwittingly wandered onto the terrain of battle. Sir Harry Smith insisted that he had to be arraigned before a British military tribunal, which, as retribution for their own losses in the battle, sentenced him to death. If true, this would have been a war crime, “a murder and deed of shame.” The story of the judicial killing of Thomas Dreyer, like that of Slagtersnek, was calculated to reveal the brutality of “British justice” at the most basic human level.

Even so, there was an underlying ambivalence in the approach to “British justice” expressed in this discourse of national victimization. As much as A Century of Wrong excoriated “British justice” as hypocritical and nothing but a mask for the brutal realities of asserting its imperial might, it still continued to invoke that same ideal of “justice”: “The traditions of the greatest people on earth are tarnished. . . . But the sky which stretches its banners over South Africa remains blue. The justice to which Piet Retief appeals when our fathers said farewell to the Cape Colony, and to which Joachim Prinsloo called aloud in the Volksraad of Natal . . . the justice to which theburghers of the Transvaal entrusted their case at Paarde Kral in 1880, remains immutable.” Despite appearances, A Century of Wrong did not set out to reject the imperial values of “justice” and “civilisation” in the name of some alternative “republican” ideal; its basic demand was that the imperial ideal of “justice” should be applied equally and fairly also in relation to
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the republics. In effect, this was an internal critique of the applications of “British justice” that located itself within the world of the British Empire. In principle, it followed that if “British justice” would only be properly applied in the case of the republics and the Afrikaners/Boers, then there would be no reason why the latter could not come to a political accommodation with the imperial powers. In this sense there was no inconsistency in Smuts and Roos, as the “authors” of *A Century of Wrong*, taking up leading political and administrative positions in the Transvaal and then Union government’s alliance with the new British Liberal government only a few years after the South African War.

**Aftermath: From the Afrikaner-Nationalist Appropriation of a Victim-Based Solidarity-Building Discourse to Its Ironic Reversal**

In retrospect it might appear that *A Century of Wrong*, published prior to the South African War, prepared the way for the nationalist understanding of the most traumatic episode of Afrikaner loss and suffering, that of the “scorched earth” policy and especially of the mass deaths of women and children in the British concentration camps during the latter part of the South African War. As many as twenty-eight thousand died in the camps, more than six times as many as the forty-five hundred who had been killed in combat and amounting to some 10 percent of the Afrikaner population at the time. *A Century of Wrong* provided a ready-made template within which this human and national disaster could be interpreted in postwar Afrikaner-nationalist literature and historiography. In F. A. van Jaarsveld’s words: “After the war the concentration camps assumed the importance in the historical image that Slagtersnek and the sufferings of the Voortrekkers in Natal had in that context before the war.”

However, this did not come about as smoothly as van Jaarsveld’s statement might suggest. An occasional historical account, such as J. A. Smith’s *Brit en Boer van Slagtersnek tot Jopie Fourie* (Brit and Boer from Slagtersnek to Jopie Fourie, 1917), did incorporate the war and the concentration camps into the Slagtersnek narrative, but this was a marginal publication. Nor was it a case of the living memories of the traumas of war being spontaneously expressed in line with this narrative template. In the immediate aftermath of the war there was indeed a proliferation of personal memoirs, war diaries, and other participant publications, including a significant number by surviving women recounting their sufferings in the British concentration
camps. But few, if any, of these personal testimonies made connections with the core narrative of the Afrikaner “nation,” or with the atrocity story of Slagtersnek. It was at a different and more symbolic level, that is, in the writings of Afrikaans poets and cultural entrepreneurs, that the personal suffering and political pain of the mass concentration camp deaths were appropriated into the narrative template of national victimization. The legacy of *A Century of Wrong* can be traced through the work of the theologian Totius (son of S. J. du Toit) and other seminal Afrikaans poets, in the campaign led by former President Steyn to commemorate the victims of the concentration camps with the Vrouemonument in Bloemfontein, in the popular nationalist writings of Langenhoven and in the cultural project of a populist historian like Gustav Preller. Meanwhile, few serious historical studies of the war itself were produced in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. It was through nationalist rhetoric and public commemoration, culminating in the Centennial of the Great Trek in 1938, that the memory of the concentration camps was made part of the core narrative. In his seminal study *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, the sociologist Dunbar Moodie described this process of ethnic mobilization as the elaboration of an Afrikaner “civil religion.” Significantly, Moodie’s account relied heavily on *A Century of Wrong* for the narrative and central themes (including the legend of Slagtersnek) of its ideal-typical description of the Afrikaner “sacred history.” In this victim-based discourse, the sufferings of Afrikaner women were socialized as that of the “nation”: “The sufferings of these righteous, innocent victims . . . the patience and enduring faith of the women in the concentration camps carried a further message for every Afrikaner.”

The counterpart of this Afrikaner-nationalist appropriation of the human and historical traumas of the concentration camps was a particularistic narrowing of its significance in ethnic and racial terms. From a humanitarian and human rights perspective, the atrocities and war crimes suffered by the civilian victims of the British “scorched earth” policies and use of mass concentration camps were justifiably denounced, both at the time and later, as “methods of barbarism.” But Afrikaner women and children were by no means the only such victims. Not only did the camp deaths include a not insignificant number of 1,676 men, but the mass concentration camps set up for black people (in total sixty-six camps confining more than one hundred thousand inmates) resulted in an estimated twenty thousand deaths of black women and children. Though this discourse was victim-based, its solidarity-building did not extend to all civilian victims, and the
mass black deaths in the concentration camps were not recognized as part of the story of the “nation,” and indeed virtually disappeared from general historical consciousness in twentieth-century South Africa.

The exclusive ethnic focus on Afrikaner women and children as victims of the concentration camps may also be compared with the humanitarian project of Emily Hobhouse. It was primarily Hobhouse’s intervention that brought the civilian deaths and atrocious conditions in the camps to public attention in Britain. Though she had some connections to British pro-Boer circles, Hobhouse’s motives were broadly humanitarian, not political or nationalist. At the time her campaign also did not extend to the similar fate of black women and children in the concentration camps, reflecting her limited sources and contacts in the prevailing wartime conditions. However, the subsequent Afrikaner-nationalist commemoration of the human and political traumas of the concentration camps came to be quite deliberately defined in exclusive ethnic and racial terms. In time these duly contributed to the human disasters of apartheid forced resettlement practices. Arguably, the humanitarian concerns of a Cosmas Desmond for the millions of “discarded peoples” who became the victims of apartheid “homelands” and resettlement policies by the later twentieth century can be regarded in line with Hobhouse’s legacy.23

The inversion whereby “South Africa” once again became a global humanitarian and human rights concern, with the descendants of the Boers no longer cast as the victims of imperial injustice but now as perpetrators of apartheid injustice, was reflected in the ironic afterlife of A Century of Wrong as a title for the construction of counter-narratives of South African history from a Black or Africanist perspective. Significantly, this occurred in politically charged commemorative contexts. Thus Three Centuries of Wrong by Melanchton (the pseudonym of Patrick Duncan, who would later become a member of the Pan-Africanist Congress) appeared in 1952, at the time of the tercentenary celebrations of the Van Riebeeck festival. Other publications, such as Three Hundred Years, by Mnguni (Hosea Jaffe), also set out to construct an Africanist counter-narrative, even if not explicitly using the same title. Also in 1952 Dr. S. M. Molema, historian and treasurer of the African National Congress, published two articles in Bantu World titled “A Historical Parallel and Warning.”24 These inversions involved more than the appeal of a catchy title. Just as A Century of Wrong had developed an internal critique of “British justice,” these counter-narratives set out to turn the tables on the erstwhile “Boer” victims of imperial might by publicly sham-
ing them with reference to shared notions of “justice” and “civilisation.” In due course Sharpeville and other political atrocities of apartheid rule would come to serve as established way stations in the alternative victim-based solidarity-building discourse of anti-apartheid resistance, though the international anti-apartheid movement would prove more substantial and sustained than the pro-Boer movements had ever been. By this time, too, not only the Boer republics but also the British Empire itself had made way for a new international order subscribing to a notion of “justice” for which A Century of Wrong had, even if only indirectly, in some sense prepared the way.

NOTES

1. A Century of Wrong, issued by F. W. Reitz (London: Review of Reviews, 1899); 2nd ed. of 1900 with preface by W. T. Stead, 1 January 1900 (this is the version cited here).
3. Anon., Een Eeuw van Onrecht (Dordrecht: Morks & Geuze, 1899); 2nd ed. 1900; anon., A Century of Injustice (Baltimore, 1899).
5. Ein Jahrhundert voller Unrecht: Ein Rückblick auf die Süd-afrikanische Politik Englands (Berlin: Walther, 1900); Un Siecle d’injustice (Paris: Dupont, 1900); Stoletie nespravedlivosti. Sbornik materialov po anglo-burskoi voine v Yuzhnoi Afrike (St. Petersburg, 1900), vol. 3.
6. A Century of Wrong, 3.
8. A Century of Wrong, 49.
Theal’s own later History of the Boers in South Africa (London: Swan Sonneschein, 1887), 70, made a point of playing down the significance of Slagtersnek.


16. The popular meaning of “Slagtersnek” was reinforced by the name itself, which literally meant “Butchers’ Neck” and has no doubt been taken by many to refer to the historical location of the botched execution. In fact, though, this was a double mistake. The name of the actual Slagtersnek referred to its having been the location where butchers’ agents from Cape Town came to buy sheep and cattle from the colonists, but that was not the scene of the execution of the Bezuidenhout rebels, which took place at Van Aardtspos, twelve miles south of Slagtersnek. The “story of Van Aardtspos” would not have carried the same force.

17. A Century of Wrong, 6.