Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal
23.2 (2025) ISSN: 2160-617X (online)
ourj.uoregon.edu

Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*: Analyzing a Black Man's View of a Seemingly White Man's War

Nikolay Morgun*

DOI: *10.5399/UO/OURJ/23.2.10*

Abstract

This work analyses *The Mafeking Diary* by Sol Plaatje. Plaatje was a key figure in the history of Black South African nationalism and one of the core founders of the African National Congress. In 1899, when Plaatje was twenty-three, he was working as a court clerk in Mafeking in the outer edge of the Cape Colony when war broke out in South Africa. The war began as an all-out assault by Boer forces against the British Cape Colony; Boer forces besieged notable towns such as Kimberley and Ladysmith. Mafeking became subject to siege under this wave of attack, from October 1899 to May 1900. Plaatje was in Mafeking during the siege and remained in the town until the very end. While under siege, Plaatje kept a diary with daily entries, recounting his struggles, experiences, and insights during the siege; this diary is significant because it is one of the few existing primary-source accounts from the perspective of a Black South African in the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The role of the present research is to categorize and qualify the insights provided by Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*. Here, I find that the *Mafeking Diary* uniquely sheds light on (1.) the immense contributions of Black South Africans to the British war effort, (2.) daily life during the siege, and (3.) the human realities of war—which I argue other accounts of the siege have not covered as effectively. In sum, this work will give careful examination to all those aspects of the diary while also providing analysis of the historical narrative and context around Plaatje himself.

1. Introduction

In November 1899, as shells and mass bombardment cascaded upon the Cape Colony's northeastern border town of Mafeking (Figure 1), a young court clerk was writing about the phenomena taking shape around him. This individual was a certain Sol Plaatje, and the works he was writing at the time eventually became known as *The Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War*. Despite Plaatje's seemingly insignificant social standing at the time, he would eventually become one of the central figures in South African history. In 1912, Plaatje was a founding member of an organization called the South African Native National Congress—which advocated for the rights of Black South Africans—becoming its secretary.[1] The group changed its name in 1923 to its more famous iteration: The African National Congress.[2] Plaatje's roles—as a key member of the Congress, novelist, and historian—arguably shaped him into a founding father of the modern South African identity. Simultaneously, Plaatje's account of the Siege of Mafeking, a pivotal event in the Boer War, sheds light on the historically neglected Black voices of the war. Although modern scholarship has done much to correct this stain on the historiography of the Boer War, the lack of contemporary primary sources from the Black perspective thus makes *The Mafeking Diary* a truly valuable and precious document in the broader historical narrative. In

[1] Nigel Worden. The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy. 5th ed. Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2012, 90.
[2] Ibid.

Nikolay Morgun (nikolay.morgun2004@gmail.com) graduated from the University of Oregon in June 2025 with a bachelor's degree in political science. For this research, he received the 2025 Black Culture & Identity Award from the University' of Oregon Black Cultural Center.

the context of the Siege of Mafeking itself, the diary proves an even more monumentally significant source. In summation, Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary* helps shed light on the immense contributions of Black South Africans to the British war effort, daily life during the siege, and the human realities of war, which other accounts of the siege have not covered as effectively.

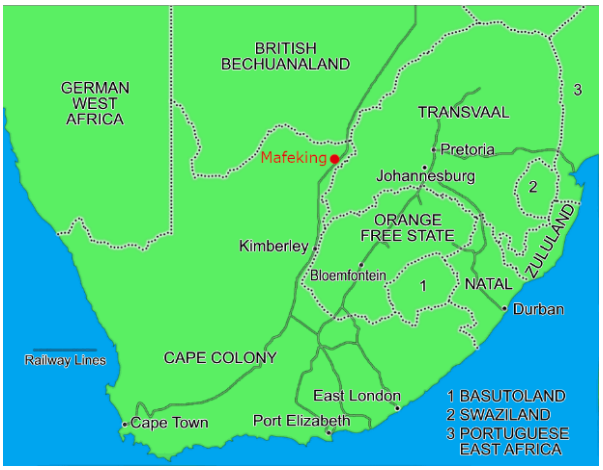

Figure 1. Map of South Africa in 1899 (modified from https://www.historyofwar.org/Maps/maps_south_africa1899.html).

2. Mafeking, Its Narratives, and the General Context of the Anglo-Boer War

The main two geopolitical actors in the Second Anglo War (also known as the South African War) were the Boers and the United Kingdom (the British). The Boers were descendants of Dutch colonists who had arrived in South Africa as early 1652. Over the course of hundreds of years, the Boers had spread deep into the South African interior and had established two semi-independent republics: the Orange Free State to the west and the South African Republic (also known as the Transvaal) to the east by the latter part of the 19th century.[3] Meanwhile, British presence in South Africa traced back to the early 1800s, and by the 1880–90s, their holdings included the Cape Colony in the west and Natal and Zululand in the east.[4]

In the years preceding the war, there was a series of disputes between the British and the Boers; such disputes were profoundly shaped by the following foundational factors. First was competition between the Boers and the British over minerals. The Boer South African Republic controlled the Witwatersrand region, which was home to numerous gold mines that were enormously coveted by British interests.[5] Second, the population working those gold mines was comprised of *Uitlanders*—foreign workers who had come to find opportunity in the mines. The Uitlanders were denied voting rights by the Boer government, and this proved to be a point of contention for the British.[6] Finally, the question of sovereignty profoundly shaped the clash between the Boers and the British. The Boers sought to assert their independence, while the British saw the Boer republics as British territory.[7] Such factors led to the ultimate outbreak of war in October of 1899.

The Siege of Mafeking represented one of several different sieges and battles in the early phase of the South African war. Inclined to form a strong offensive before a mass British response, Boer combined the forces of the South African Republic and the Orange Free State and strategically attacked several vital Cape towns and ports. It also laid siege to the geopolitical centers of Kimberley and Ladysmith. Mafeking, located directly on the border of the South African Republic, became subject itself to siege as part of this broader wave. The siege would last from October 1899 to May 1900, stretching over a grueling two-hundred days. The British garrison was led by Lord Robert Baden-Powell (Figure 2), and the narrative set there by Baden-Powell

[3] Worden, Chapter 2 "The Conquest of Land." This chapter goes into depth about the history of European expansion into South Africa.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Worden, 25-31
[6] Worden, 30-38
[7] Ibid.

himself would arguably symbolize the colonial myth that would encapsulate the siege itself.

Figure 2. Portrait of Lord Baden-Powell, the commander of the British garrison during the siege (image sourced from Wikimedia commons).

During the siege, Baden-Powell made illustrations of the events that took place; these illustrations would later be used as symbology for the Boy Scout Movement—which Baden-Powell helped initiate—to validate art in a masculine, tough, militaristic context.[8] The characterization of Mafeking as an event of macho-triumphalism demonstrates how the event became incorporated into a broader colonial myth of glorious war: rather than emphasizing the toll of war, the importance of the civilians, or even the complicated dynamics of white colonizers interacting with a Black population, the focus is instead on pure chauvinistic and machoistic glory-seeking.

Historian John Bottomley from the South African North-West University makes a compelling argument for how events such as the Siege of Mafeking served to shape the broad colonial worldview or narrative. Images of the siege—such as civilians playing cricket in the face of Boer bombardment—underline a colonial-imperial narrative about the nobility of war:[9] such images depict brave people gallantly maintaining their resolve, even when facing adversity. This narrative appeals to broader sense of heroism and stoicism, which becomes engrained in the imperial mythos.

Bottomley further notes how Mafeking itself slots into a broader chain of events in the historical narrative of glorious British military might and accomplishments in the face of the enemy, stretching from King Arthur to Lord Nelson at Trafalgar.[10] Mafeking, in the traditional colonial narrative, serves Baden-Powell's desire to showcase the triumph and glory of the empire. Such a "history," by its ontology, is truly a hagiography of the empire. It is a tool of indoctrination. The colonial ideology emphasizes certain members of history who matter and conveniently leaves out supposedly unimportant elements—such as the military contributions of black South Africans to the British war effort—or the true realities of war—such as the suffering of civilians.

Importantly, the colonial narrativization of the siege arguably began before the siege had even concluded. One of the most illustrative examples of this comes from Mafeking's official newspaper, the *Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian.* This newspaper was most certainly written by British journalists, for a British audience. Essentially, its role was to write pro-British propaganda. During its November 1 issue, the *Mafeking Mail* boldly

[8] Graeme Chalmers and Andrea A. Dancer, "Art, Boys, and the Boy Scout Movement in S*tudies in Art Education*," National Art Education Association Spring 2007, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Spring, 2007), 271.

[9] John Bottomley, "'Garrisoning the Moon Against an Attack from Mars'; The Siege of Mafeking and the Imperial Mindset in *New Contree*," New Contree, Vol. 41 (1997), 8.

[10] Bottomley, 11.

proclaimed: "We have only to remain steadfast as the matter of a little time will see decided the first great step towards the settlement of the future of South Africa"[11] (Figure 3).

THE MAFEKING MAIL
SPECIAL SEIGE SLIP.

ISSUED DAILY, SHELLS PERMITTING. ONLY TERMS: ONE SHILLING PER WEEK, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE.

No. 1 Mafeking, November 1st. 1899.

Technical difficulties prevented the issue of the "Mafeking Mail" for Saturday last. Those difficulties we hope speedily to surmount. In the meantime we purpose keeping our friends informed of, happenings from day to day; "Oud Kraker" or "Black Maria" *et hoc genus omne* permitting

The Mafeking Mail.

MAFEKING, 1st NOVEMBER, 1899.

HOW WE ARE TO-DAY.

We have borne the much-feared bombardment for a fortnight and still Mafeking stands. From what we have experienced we do not consider ourselves too optimistic in anticipating a successful ending to the contest. For the first time in the history of Boer warfare have the Boers been defeated at every turn, by a force far inferior in point of numbers. Since the first attack on Saturday, October 14th they fly directly our guns are heard. Safely out of range they fire into the town but they do not appear to be pining for another attempt at storming Mafeking. In the "general orders" issued last Sunday the following occurs: "The Colonel Commanding having made a careful inspection of the defences of the town and the Native stadt, is now of opinion that no force that the Boers are likely to bring against us could possible effect an entrance at any point." Now, this is like the advertisements say a certain cocoa is: grateful and comforting, and we feel that having got so far through the ordeal we have only to remain steadfast as the matter of a little time will see decided the first great step towards the settlement of the future of South Africa. There is no doubt that the attention of Great Britain, the Colonies, in fact the whole world is now riveted upon this little spot which is now playing a prominent part in the most important epoch of the history of this wonderful continent. We know there is no need to urge the claims of our country and kindred upon our gallant garrison. Being in such close touch with each other that nothing but the exceptional circumstances thrust upon us could have made possible, we are in a position to judge and recognise the steady determination that British blood and British pluck exhibit when such a crisis as the present arises, and we know that the memory of Bronkhurst Spruit, Majuba and Potchefstrom will make that determination, supported by the knowledge of our grand successes of the past fortnight more firm, more strong and more united than has been before, and this, with the grand soldier, who is in command here, will render certain the first stages towards the complete crushing of the enemy.

AND WILL BE NEXT WEEK.

There is no doubt that there was landed in South Africa by Sunday last a body of fifty-seven thousand men, including probably Twelve or Fourteen Regiments of Cavalry, Twenty or Twenty-two Batteries of Artillery, and Forty Regiments of Infantry, besides, most likely, a body of Mounted Infantry. Of this force there will be not less than Fifteen Thousand disembarked at Capetown and dispatched on road here. They may now be settling accounts with the Boers outside Kimberley, in which case Vryburg might be reached by Sunday, allowing for some delay at Fourteen Streams. When our troops reach Vryburg the air of Mafeking will not suit Cronje's sprinters, so by this day week we may begin to wish them a pleasant journey back to the Transvaal. It will then be merely an interchange of courtesy if we return the visit.

CRONJE'S WOMEN'S LAAGER GUN.

When the big gun, with which the enemy hoped to pulverise us, and which has sent more shells in the neighbourhood of the Hospital and Women's Laager than in any other parts of the town, is taken by our troops we think it only fair to Mafeking that it should be brought here. It will make a good memorial and be an object lesson to succeeding generations who, reading the history of our bombardment, and seeing the weapon employed against our women and children, will be able to judge of the nineteenth century Boer's fitness to dominate such a territory as the Transvaal. Let it be placed, say, in the space opposite the entrance to the Railway Station, raised on end, with the unexploded shells piled at its base, with a description of Colonel Baden-Powell's clever defence of the place. We hope the Colonel will bear the town in mind when the disposal of the gun is under discussion.

Major Lord E. Cecil, C.S.O., last evening issued the following under the heading of General Orders:—

The detachment of B.S.A. Police forming the garrison of Cannon Kopje, under command of Colonel Walford, have this day performed a brilliant service by the gallant and determined stand made by them on their post in the face of a very hot shell fire from the enemy.

The intention of the Boers had been, after getting their guns and attacking force, in position during the night, to storm Cannon Kopje at daybreak, and thence to bombard the S.E. portion of the town and to carry it with the large force they had collected in the Molopo Valley.

Their whole scheme has been defeated by the gallant resistance made by the garrison of Cannon Kopje, who not only refused to budge from their position under a cross fire of artillery, but succeeded in inflicting such severe losses on the enemy as compelled him to retreat. In this they were ably assisted by the timely and well-directed fire of a 7-pounder under Lieut Murchison from Ellis's corner

The Colonel Commanding deplores the loss of the gallant officers and men who fell this day. By the death of Captain the Hon. Douglas Henry Marsham and Captain Charles Alexander Kerr Pechell, Her Majesty loses two officers of exceptional promise and soldierly qualifications.

The Colonel Commanding believes that he is giving voice to the feelings of the whole of the Mafeking garrison in expressing the deepest sympathy with the B. S. A. Police in their loss, and at the same time in congratulating Colonel Walford and his men on their brilliant achievement.

Printed and published by Townshend & Son, Market Square, Mafeking. Editor and Manager: G. H. H. Whaite.

Figure 3. Scan of the November 1, 1899, issue of the Mafeking Mail (courtesy of the Readex African Newspapers, Series 1 database).

The assumption made by the newspaper was that the siege presented a mighty and great battle within a larger war to decide the fate of South Africa. Rather than focusing on the civilians and those directly impacted by the war itself, this account directly concerns itself with the fate and implication of the British Empire. Such a narrative, that prioritizes machinations of imperial machinery, further emphasises the narrativization that Bottomley describes: The Siege of Mafeking is understood merely as a chronology of empire, its narrative incorporated into the indoctrinating colonial ethos.

The traditional, colonial narrative surrounding the siege thus makes the diary of Sol Plaatje an even more important artifact. In the diary, Plaatje undeniably expresses his sympathies with the British defenders of the town. However, Plaatje also gives an account rich with numerous details that buck the traditional imperial narrative. His emphasis on the contributions of Black South Africans provides a counterbalancing, notable perspective. Plaatje himself notes how *The Mafeking Mail* "regards the Native [Indigenous, Black South Africans] as a mere creature."[12] Overall, Plaatje's account provides an important juxtaposition to the colonial narratives of the Siege of Mafeking, allowing for an actual history—rather than a hagiography—to develop. To understand *The Mafeking Diary* better, the author himself must also be understood.

3. Understanding Sol Plaatje

Sol Plaatje's journey is that of a complicated and nuanced formation of identity—from a court clerk to a champion and voice of Black South Africans. Plaatje writes *The Mafeking Diary* from a fundamentally pro-British perspective. This is largely a product of his early sociocultural molding: Plaatje's early upbringing was around mission-educated Xhosa and Mfengu people.[13] The values of this community were staunchly Christian, but also pro-Cape-Colony and pro-British, because the non-racialized aspect of the Cape Franchise allowed Black South Africans to have a say in the affairs of the Cape Colony, which was ruled by the United Kingdom.[14] Such early identity formation around this community made

[11] The Mafeking Mail, "How We Are To-Day. In *The Mafeking Mail Special Siege Slip.*" Issue No. 1, November 1, 1899, 1.
[12] Sol. T. Plaatje (Solomon Tshekisho), John L Comaroff, Brian Willan, and Andrew Reed. *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War*. Cambridge England: Meridor Books, in association with J. Currey, 1990, 60.
[13] Plaatje, 6.
[14] Plaatje, 7.

Plaatje himself a fervent British loyalist early on.[15] This early Plaatje (Figure 4) is the one whose voice is most channeled in the diary itself.

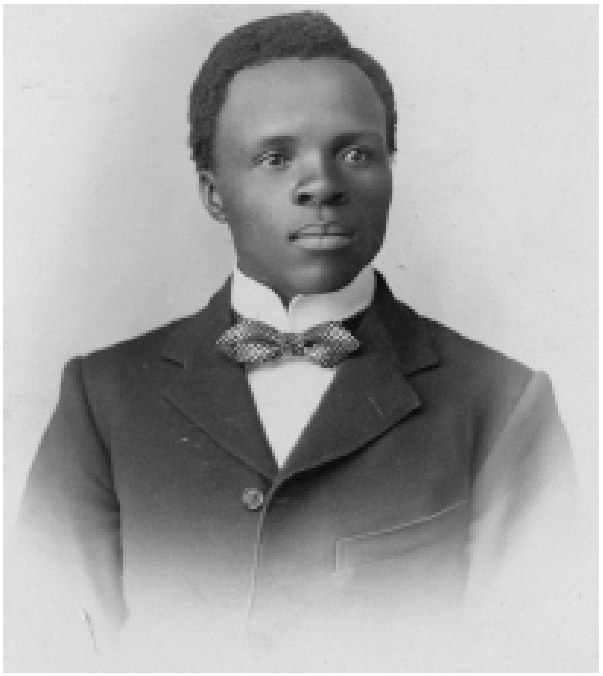

Figure 4. Sol Plaatje in 1900 (image sourced from Native Life in South Africa (1915) P. S. King and Son Ltd., London).

Plaatje's political evolution continued after the onset of the Boer War. For Plaatje, a crucial turning point was arguably the creation of the Union of South Africa (Figure 5) in 1910 and the Natives' Land Act of 1913. The Union of South Africa created a governing system in which the British Cape Colony and the former Boer Republics were united into a single political entity under the white-supremacist rule of the Boers. Although the Union was a holding of the British, in practice, it was the Boers who took charge in decision-making.[16] The Natives' Land Act, meanwhile, segregated land ownership and restricted African land ownership to so-called "reserves."[17] The nature of both events galvanized Plaatje to begin his passionate activism on behalf of Black South Africans.[18] Plaatje was a founding member of the Native National Congress in 1912 and made visits to London to lobby the British government, with one particularly notable visit in 1919 impressing Prime Minister David Lloyd George.[19] Plaatje's achievements extended beyond activism: his written works *Native Life In South Africa* in 1916 and *Mhudi* in 1930 both eloquently laid out his perspective of Black South Africans and Boer white supremacist rule. *Native Life* was notably written as a response to the impact of the Natives' Land Act on Africans.[20] *Mhudi* itself attained notoriety because it became the first Black South African novel written in English.[21]

Figure 5. Map of the Union of South Africa in 1910 (image sourced from Wikimedia Commons).

Plaatje's vision and writings have, up until recently, been deeply discounted in the South African historical canon. Peter Limb of Michigan State University notes: "Few writers have considered Plaatje a de facto historian."[22] Furthermore, Plaatje's fundamentally radical and forward-thinking vision, which took hold most apparently in the second decade of the 20th century, has also gone overlooked. For example,

[15] Ibid.
[16] Worden, 36-37.
[17] Worden, xiii.
[18] Plaatje, 10.
[19] Plaatje, 11.
[20] Peter Limb, "Sol Plaatje Reconsidered: Rethinking Plaatje's Attitudes to Class, Nation, Gender, and Empire in *African Studies*," African Studies, Vol. 62 (2003), 34.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Limb, 35.

Native Life can be viewed as "the first attempt to situate rising African nationalism in an historical context."[23] Additionally, a fundamentally underrated aspect of Plaatje's radicalism was his pro-worker rhetoric. Plaatje spoke about the impact of the Land Act on Black miners in 1913; wrote on behalf of Lichtenburg miners, who suffered under poor conditions in the 1920s; and in 1931, lobbied the Minister of Native Affairs regarding the suffering of unemployed workers.[24] Moments like these speak to Plaatje's fundamentally forward-thinking outlook and radicalism that molded him in the decades following the writing of the diary.

The story of *The Mafeking Diary* is ultimately emblematic of the story of Plaatje himself. Like Plaatje's contributions, the diary itself has undergone much work to find its place in the South African historical pantheon. The diary was saved from obscurity when Plaatje's grandsons gave it to anthropologist John Comaroff in the 1970s[25] (Figure 6).

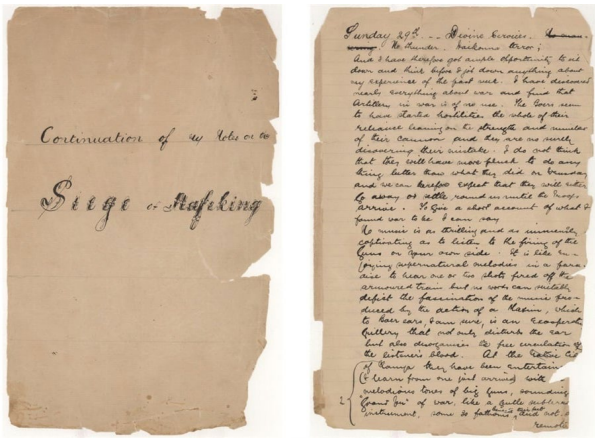

Figure 6. Fragment of the original *Mafeking Diary* (image courtesy of Wits Historical Papers).

The work of Comaroff and other scholars in South Africa has done much to elevate the diary into the historical limelight and draw newfound attention to it.[26] Comaroff notes the transformation of 1994, in which Plaatje became intertwined with the story of Mafeking as a local hero—presumably in the context of his presence during the siege—and founding father—most likely due to his role in the African National Congress, a core institution of Black opposition to white-supremacist rule.[27] 1994 itself was significant because South Africa had just undergone a massive sociocultural transformation, with the fall of Apartheid, and in that same year had held its first free and fair election, in which Nelson Mandela was elected president.[28] In the spirit of this sweeping change, Plaatje became recontextualized in the South African historical canon. The transformation of the historical narrative around Plaatje as the diary was being published reveals not only the gradual convergence of the narrative with the elevation of the importance of Plaatje, but also the relevance of Plaatje's diary to the historical narrative.

Although the Plaatje of 1899–1900 was not yet the radical visionary he would later become, Plaatje's diary serves to construct a foundation for his development in the decades to come. The historiography surrounding the diary elevated not only the story of a single document, but also an entire narrative almost lost to time. The recovery of the diary allowed Plaatje's analyses of Black South African contributions, daily life under the siege, and the toll of war to be recognized in the historical limelight.

3. Black Contributions to the British War Effort

One of the most important aspects of *The Mafeking Diary* is Plaatje's recognition of Black South Africans' contributions during the Siege of Mafeking. The diary is populated with various actions taken by Black South Africans, descriptions of Plaatje's interactions with Black

[23] Ibid.
[24] Limb, 43–44.
[25] Jane Starfield, "Review: Re-thinking Sol Plaatje's Mafeking Diary in *Journal of Southern African Studies*," Taylor and Francis, Dec. 2001, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Dec. 2001), 856.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Starfield, 857.
[28] Worden, Chapter 7, "The New South Africa." This chapter goes gives context into the transformation South Africa has undergone since the end of Apartheid.

South African people, and different perspectives and voices from Black South Africans directly. In one passage from November 12, Plaatje writes: "We have a black Sherlock Holmes in the person of Manomphe's son, Freddy. "[29] Plaatje then notes that Freddy has gathered information from outside the besieged town, risking capture by the Boers in the process of doing so.[30] The direct praise that Plaatje gives to Freddy—highlighting his contribution to the defense of Mafeking as a runner passing through enemy lines—speaks volumes to Plaatje's inside perspective. The traditional narrative paints the siege as a struggle amongst white men in the framework of imperialist might; Black South Africans, people who were considered mere colonial subjects and unworthy of even a mention in the historical record, were typically ignored and set aside. Countering this, Plaatje not only names specific instances, but even specific people. This passage is far from Plaatje's only mention of Black contributions, but its early appearance highlights their consistent significance.

In one part of the December 11 entry of the diary, Plaatje discusses how two more runners—a Black man named Samuel Lefenya and his wife—were shot and severely wounded while attempting to pass through enemy lines.[31] On March 18, Plaatje notes the work of some runners in delivering messages from Mafeking to the outside world, describing their work as being done in a "'Sherlock Holmeish' sort of fashion."[32] These narratives support the idea that there were enough cracks in the Boer encirclement during the siege that runners could pass through to disseminate information and supplies. These runners, more broadly, were part of the system of labor and support roles that Black South Africans took on during the Boer War. Bill Nasson of the University of Cape Town writes: "Dozens of black hauliers also contracted to the military as independent civil carriers."[33] Although different from directly fighting on the front line, such contributions provided valuable logistics necessary to sustain the war effort. In the context of the Siege of Mafeking, without the existence of Black support and aid, Mafeking would not have held out as well as it did against the Boer siege. Despite such necessary and crucial contributions, however, the Boer War's framing remains as a "White Man's War." Plaatje leaves one of the few surviving historical accounts from the period that openly highlights Black South Africans' contributions, as further described by Nasson. The white narrative is written, but it excludes a necessary piece of the puzzle, leaving the oxymoronic story of a white man's war deeply imbued with the involvement of Black participants.

Beyond labor logistics, there was also an active military effort by Black South Africans during the siege. Lord Baden-Powell relied on the direct support of the Tshidi to defend Mafeking during the siege.[34] Furthermore, a militia unit of 67 "colored" soldiers, known as the "Black Watch," also helped garrison the town.[35] Plaatje himself wrote about the Black Watch, noting: "There is a regiment composed of a mixture of Zulu, Shangaan, and other Transkeian breeds under one McKenzie, styled the Black Watch."[36] Here, Plaatje refers to the service of Black militiamen from various ethnic groups and various parts of the country, such as the Zulus from the eastern part of the country in Zululand. This direct highlighting of not only Black logistical, but also military, contributions elevates Plaatje's diary as a remarkably insightful work of history. A simple colonial narrative of glorious white imperialism ultimately has no place for the reality of Black

[29] Plaatje, 31..
[30] Ibid.
[31] Plaatje, 56.
[32] Plaatje, 120.
[33] Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902*. Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press, 1991, 73.
[34] Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899-1902*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1983, 31.
[35] Warwick, 32.
[36] Plaatje, 53.

defensive organizing. If Black contributions are included, then that easy and convenient myth of the glorious "white man's war" quickly implodes. Thus, it is left to Plaatje to highlight these basic realities of the siege. Through his detailed description of logistics and military assistance, Plaatje gives an important account of Black involvement during the Siege of Mafeking.

4. Daily Life

Another major aspect of the strength of Plaatje's account relative to others'—such as the *Mafeking Mail's*—is his detailing of daily life under the siege. Rather than focusing on strictly military matters, Plaatje spends a good deal of his account detailing the day-to-day experience of the civilian. On November 18, Plaatje writes: "The prices of foodstuffs ran up to a very high degree."[37] Plaatje then notes significant increases in cost for specific goods, such as bread and meat.[38] This detail helps shed light on what life under the siege must have been like. What kind of choices did one have to make because of the increased cost of living? What kind of toil did people live under? Furthermore, Plaatje's descriptions help make the siege more human than a cold account in a history book. The myth of the glorious noble imperial struggle is also further undone, as Plaatje's depiction of life reveals the truly human consequences and daily realities of siege.

Here, Plaatje's account can be contrasted with an alternate one from British journalist Angus Hamilton (Figure 7), who was also physically present at the siege. Hamilton's account would be published as a book, quite simply titled *The Siege of Mafeking*. In one chapter, Hamilton describes the conditions of the day in the brickfields, a series of fortifications and barricades located outside the town. Hamilton notes: "Nothing is quite so pleasant, so invigorating, nor quite so dangerous as life in these brickfield posts."[39]

Figure 7. Angus Hamilton, a British journalist present at the Siege of Mafeking in 1911 (image sourced from the book "Somaliland" by Angus Hamilton, Hutchinson and Co. London 1911).

This quotation speaks not only to the real danger of living in a military fortification, constantly surrounded by the threat of death at the hands of the enemy, but also about the simultaneous, enjoyably thrilling aspects of being constantly on the front line. Then, Hamilton further describes the daily ritual between the Boers and Black Cape soldiers of mutually throwing insults back and forth.[40] Hamilton's narrative creates an arguably humanizing picture, helping to create a sense of connection between the audience and those on the ground. The account's core weakness is in the fact that it is clearly centered around the military angle of the siege, rather than on civilian life. Furthermore, Hamilton's language demonstrates the machismo born of the imperialistic attitude towards war, as Hamilton exalts the pleasantness and invigoration of living in the brickfields. In this sense, Plaatje's diary proves to be a more

[37] Plaatje, 34.
[38] Ibid.
[39] J. Angus Hamilton, *The Siege of Mafeking*, Methuen and co., 1900, 222.
[40] Ibid.

compelling account, as the focus is quite literally shifted to the kitchen counter matters, such as the rising price of food.

Arguably, the biggest culprit behind many contemporary accounts' ignorance to the realities of daily life is *The Mafeking Mail* itself. In the November 15 issue, *The Mail* writes: "The advance was made with great dash and in spite of resistance made by the enemy, our men carried it at the point of the bayonet, capturing guns, wagons, stores and camp equipment."[41] The focus here is purely on the glory of war and imperial success. Nowhere within this same article is there any mention of the daily lives of Mafeking residents, perspectives of non-combatant aides to the town, or anyone who is not a soldier on the front line. The imperialist notion of the violence inflicted on the enemy being of primary importance—rather than, for example, violence inflicted on the civilians—is prominent in *The Mail*'s reporting. For a paper meant to report on the activities and life of the town it is based in, it merely recycles military propaganda for the sake of painting an imperial hagiography. Plaatje's diary does take a pro-British stance, but it fundamentally presents itself as a work documenting life and history. Its angles on daily life, such as the rising price of food, make it more historically representative than *The Mail*'s accounts of the siege.

5. The Toll of War

In his *Mafeking Diary,* Plaatje writes a narrative that compellingly tells a story that fundamentally speaks to the human condition, in how people process tremendous suffering as it occurs around them. In this, Plaatje also becomes an effective chronicler of the true toil and cost of war. In one passage from a particularly long account on December 8, Plaatje writes: "I have never before realized so keenly that I am walking on the brink of the grave. It is really shocking, while still meditating how one of your fellow creatures met his fate at the shell of the Dutch cannon."[42] The passage is blunt, yet simultaneously truly rich. Plaatje gives a rather cold, yet also deeply humanizing, account of the ugly nature of war—to know how a fellow person must have met their fate at the hands of the shelling. An event that can be given an armchair descriptor is poetically captured in the perspective of another human being. The passage is not rife with glory. It is a stare straight into the reflection of reality around oneself. A life that Plaatje may have spoken to, or known deeply, was snuffed out.

Angus Hamilton provides a similarly grim account of the impact of siege upon the psyche. Hamilton writes: "The siege drags on, however, the days seeming to be an endless monotony in which there is absolutely nothing to sustain one's interest. Week by week we make a united and laborious attempt to whip our flagging energies into some activity."[43] As time during the siege drags on, the boredom caused by siege itself begins to drain the soul of those under it. The human spirit and psyche decline, reducing many of its victims to a state of longing and desperation. Hamilton effectively captures the toll of war through the aspect of boredom, characterizing failed attempts to foster "energies into some activity," as he puts it. This deeply human element of the toll of war can be placed alongside Plaatje's account. Plaatje's account can be seen as more directly visceral, as he speaks to the direct death caused by war; however, both Plaatje and Hamilton offer deeply humanizing and moving perspectives of war's impacts on civilians.

Meanwhile, as a propaganda mouthpiece for imperialism, *The Mafeking Mail* wholly avoids discussing the true toll of war. The outlet is ready and eager to report on the glorious successes of British imperialism on the front, but accounts

[41] The Mafeking Mail, "Telegrams from Capetown in *The Mafeking Mail Special Siege Edition*," Issue No. 11, November 15 1899, 1.

[42] Plaatje, 50.

[43] Hamilton, 208.

such as Plaatje's—regarding the true reality of shelling and death—do not conveniently fit the imperial line of war's glory and nobility. Broadly, the conditions endured by the people of Mafeking during the siege amounted to a mixture of boredom and claustrophobia, with shells crashing at random.[44] Under such dangerous and uncertain circumstances, demoralization set in among those in the town.[45] This is emblematic of both Plaatje and Hamilton's accounts of the separate tolls of shelling and boredom. As a resident of Mafeking during the entirety of the siege, Plaatje bore witness to such suffering, and his diary reflects the deeply personal experience of one who has undergone the toil and misery of war. In the January 2 entry of the diary, Plaatje writes about the aftermath of an artillery shell hitting an individual, describes how it "amputated [him] in a most piteous manner – both arms and legs. He died after this."[46] This scene of mutilation would most certainly have left a strong impression on Plaatje, as this suffering was something he had experienced firsthand. Such emotions are reflected in Plaatje's writing, making for a truly compelling and moving account of the toil of war during the siege, as not seen by other accounts.

6. Conclusion

Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary* is a truly remarkable document. A writing almost lost to time, it highlights the contributions of Black South Africans, daily life during the siege, and toll of war better than other contemporary accounts of the siege, such as the *Mafeking Mail*'s. Plaatje was a visionary for South Africa and a voice of his people. Though his development, in this regard, only emerged after the war, there is no doubt that Plaatje's experiences during the Boer War and the siege of Mafeking served as a key foundation for his developing worldview. Seeing the immense role that Black South Africans played and the toil and suffering of war itself, followed by the utter disappointment of the lack of change for the better, and even worsening conditions for Black South Africans, must have felt like a crushing weight of absolute futility on Plaatje. Ultimately, the diary speaks not only to Plaatje as a monumental figure in his own right, but also to the complex and ongoing process of the development of the modern South African identity.

Bibliography

Bottomley, John. "'Garrisoning the Moon Against an Attack from Mars'; The Siege of Mafeking and the Imperial Mindset in *New Contree*," New Contree, Vol. 41 (1997), 7-24.

Chalmers Graeme and Andrea A. Dancer. "Art, Boys, and the Boy Scout Movement in S*tudies in Art Education*," National Art Education Association Spring 2007, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Spring, 2007), 265-281.

Hamilton, J. Angus. *The Siege of Mafeking*, Methuen and co. 1900.

Limb, Peter. "Sol Plaatje Reconsidered: Rethinking Plaatje's Attitudes to Class, Nation, Gender, and Empire in *African Studies*," African Studies, Vol. 62 (2003), 33-52.

Nasson, Bill. *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902*. Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Plaatje, Sol. T. (Solomon Tshekisho), John L Comaroff, Brian Willan, and Andrew Reed. *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War*. Cambridge [England: Meridor Books, in association with J. Currey, 1990.

Pretorius, F. (Fransjohan). *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2010.

Starfield, Jane. "Review: Re-thinking Sol Plaatje's Mafeking Diary in *Journal of Southern African Studies*," Taylor and Francis, Dec. 2001, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Dec. 2001), 855-863.

The Mafeking Mail. "How We Are To-Day. In *The Mafeking Mail Special Siege Slip.*", Issue No. 1, November 1, 1899.

The Mafeking Mail. "Telegrams From Capetown in *The Mafeking Mail Special Siege Edition*," Issue No. 11, November 15 1899.

Warwick, Peter. *Black People and the South African War, 1899-1902*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Worden, Nigel. *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*. 5th ed. Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 20

[44] Fransjohan Pretorius, *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*, Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2010, 256.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Plaatje, 76.