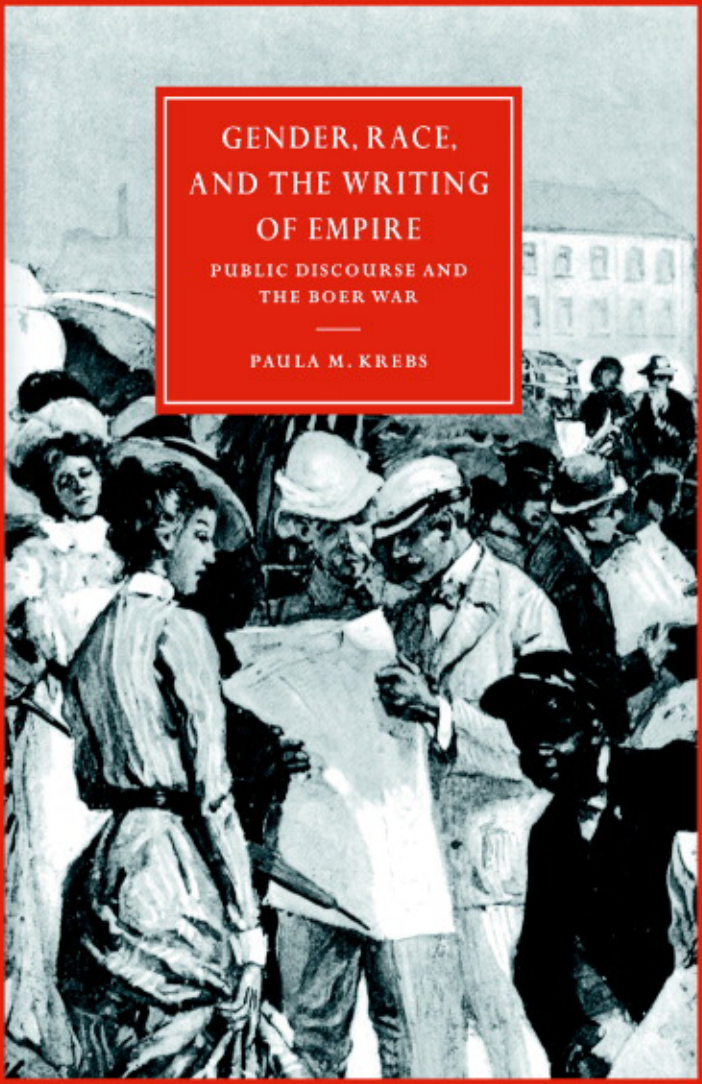
GENDER, RACE, AND THE WRITING OF EMPIRE

PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE BOER WAR

PAULA M. KREBS



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All of London exploded on the night of 18 May 1900, in the biggest West End party ever seen. The mix of media manipulation, patriotism, and class, race, and gender politics that produced the "spontaneous" festivities of Mafeking Night begins this analysis of the cultural politics of late-Victorian imperialism. Paula M. Krebs examines "the last of the gentlemen's wars" – the Boer War of 1899–1902 – and the struggles to maintain an imperialist hegemony in a twentieth-century world, through the war writings of Arthur Conan Doyle, Olive Schreiner, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling, as well as contemporary journalism, propaganda, and other forms of public discourse. Her feminist analysis of such matters as the sexual honor of the British soldier at war, the deaths of thousands of women and children in "concentration camps," and new concepts of race in South Africa marks this book as a significant contribution to British imperial studies.

Paula M. Krebs is Associate Professor of English at Wheaton College, Massachusetts. She is co-editor of *The Feminist Teacher Anthology: Pedagogies and Classroom Strategies* (1998) and has published articles in *Victorian Studies*, *History Workshop Journal*, and *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

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GENDER, RACE, AND THE WRITING OF EMPIRE

Public Discourse and the Boer War

PAULA M. KREBS

Wheaton College, Massachusetts

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To my mother, Dorothy M. Krebs, and to the memory of
my father, George F. Krebs, who knew war and
knew not to glamorize it.

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CHAPTER I

The war at home

In the 1939 Shirley Temple film of the classic children's story *A Little Princess*, young Sara Crewe rousts all the slumbering residents of Miss Minchin's Female Seminary from their beds with the cry of "Mafeking is relieved! Mafeking is relieved!" Sara patriotically drags her schoolmates and teachers into the wild London street celebrations marking the end of the Boer War siege that she and the rest of England had been following in the newspapers for months. This particular scene in the film seems a bit odd to those familiar with Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel (1905), however, because the novel never mentions the Boer War – Sara's father is posted in India, not South Africa. But in 1939, it was better to send Captain Crewe to Mafeking. With Britain at war and the United States weighing its options, fellow-feeling for the British was important. If a film was to inspire transatlantic loyalties, to remind American audiences of the kind of stuff those Brits were made of, then Mafeking Night was a perfect image to use. Mafeking, in the early part of the century, still meant wartime hope, British pluck, and home-front patriotism. Using Mafeking Night as its centerpiece, *The Little Princess* (the film's title) was a kind of *Mrs. Miniver* for children.

Mafeking Night must have been an irresistible choice for the makers of *The Little Princess* – it had military glory, class-mixing, and rowdiness in the gaslit streets of nostalgia-laden Victorian London. The scene had been truly unprecedented.[1] When news of the relief of Mafeking reached London at 9:17 p.m. on Friday 18 May 1900, thanks to a Reuters News Agency telegram, central London exploded. Thousands danced, drank, kissed, and created general uproar. In what has been seen as perhaps the premier expression of crude public support of late-Victorian imperialism, Liverpool, Newcastle, Birmingham, York, and Glasgow rioted with fireworks, brass bands, and blasts on factory sirens. This celebration of empire was made possible by the new halfpenny press that spread the daily news to thousands of households

that had never before read a newspaper daily. The most significant spontaneous public eruption in London since the 1886 Trafalgar Square riots, Mafeking Night could hardly have been more different in character from those protests of unemployment. Economic theorist J. A. Hobson, and V. I. Lenin, whose *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) grew directly from Hobson's writings, argued that imperialism distracted the British working classes from their economic problems by promising payoffs from afar in imperial trade as well as by replacing class consciousness with nationalism and pride in the empire. Mafeking Night has come down to us as a central symbol of such distraction – the premier image of late-Victorian mass support for nationalism, patriotism, and imperial capitalism.

This chapter argues that the events of Mafeking Night must be read differently. The events that led to the "spontaneous" riots of Mafeking Night show that the celebrations in fact say less about British support for imperialism than they do about the power of the press to tease the British public into a frenzy of anticipation and then to release that tension in a rush of carefully-directed enthusiasm. Mafeking Night symbolizes what J. A. Hobson saw as the dangerous power of the popular press in creating imperial sentiment in the service of capitalism. It is a compilation of the power of some other very important symbols that were at work in support of imperialism – symbols of British masculinity, class structure, and patronage of "lower races." Each of these symbols is at work in the making of Mafeking Night, and each holds some profound contradictions in the period of the Boer War, which is why Mafeking Night itself is such a highly ambiguous symbol of Victorian support for imperialism.

Mafeking Night made jingoism safe for the middle classes by blurring the distinction between jingoism, which had been seen as working-class over-enthusiasm for the empire, and patriotism, that middle-class virtue of support for one's country against foreign opposition. Mafeking Night defused the threat that had been posed by mass action in London, such as the bloody Trafalgar Square riots of just fourteen years before. Anne McClintock points out the fear of the "crowd" in late-Victorian London: "In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the urban crowd became a recurring fetish for ruling-class fears of social unrest and underclass militancy. Lurking in the resplendent metropolis, the crowd embodied a 'savage' and dangerous underclass waiting to spring upon the propertied classes" (*Imperial Leather* 118–19). The nineteenth-century study of crowd psychology, which began with examinations of the

French Revolution and the Paris Commune, focused on fear, as J. S. McClelland points out in *The Crowd and the Mob* (200). By the publication of Gustave Le Bon's book on the crowd (published in English in 1899 as *The Psychology of Peoples*), "crowd psychology had long been chipping away at the sense of distance which ordinary, civilized, law-abiding men had always felt when they looked at crowds" (McClelland *The Crowd and the Mob* 200), and Le Bon's elitism encouraged a middle-class fear of being subsumed into an underclass crowd. Mafeking Night was a mass action in the streets, but it was neither produced nor controlled by the working classes. Young Sara Crewe would have been perfectly safe in the 18 and 19 May outdoor revels in the West End of London, for they had nothing at all in common with working-class protests of unemployment or with the worker unrest that had terrified the ruling classes earlier in the century. In the newspaper versions of the event, Mafeking Night was a middle-class party (with some working-class guests). The date had been set and invitations issued by lower-middle-class media – the popular press.

In a Victorian Britain where masses in the streets had always meant strikes and riots, there had been no precedent for large-scale public celebration – even the public celebrations of victory over Napoleon had been relatively small and sedate. But the British people surged into the twentieth century when they poured into the West End to celebrate the relief of Mafeking. Newspapers and journals touted the mixed-class nature of the Mafeking festivities: costermongers mingled with gentlemen. The rioters were not working-class radicals, threatening the political or social order. In the language the press used to describe Mafeking Night and the following day, they were "everyone" and "London" and even "England." They were created as a group by the newspapers, and this chapter examines the mechanism of their creation and the function of them as a group representing "public opinion."

After the demise of the eighteenth-century coffeehouse culture around which Jürgen Habermas formed his concept of the "public sphere," the arena through which governments heard feedback from elite social groups about public policies, the equivalent forum for public exchange of ideas became the periodicals – the reviews and even the magazines.[2] But by the end of the Victorian period, the periodicals, though still prestigious as public forums, were losing their pride of place in public opinion formation to the newspapers. With the spread of literacy after the Education Act of 1870 and the emergence of the new popular press, some political debates, including questions about South

Africa, shifted to the newspapers. As "public" took on new meanings in the nineteenth century, as new publics were being created that included women and the lower-middle and working classes, the quality and the popular press, daily and weekly, became the "public sphere," and public discourse of many kinds became important in the creation of government and even military policy.

The Reform Acts of 1832 and 1870 had begun to create a new relationship between the government and the "public" in Britain. Historians of public opinion, such as J.A.W. Gunn and Dror Wahrman, recognize the significance of newspapers in public opinion, even if they rarely resolve whether the press shapes or reflects public opinion. But the eighteenth-century newspaper, and even the 1830s newspaper, was a qualitatively and quantitatively different thing from the daily of 1899, and the publics reached by the end-of-century newspapers were very different indeed from earlier ones. After the establishment of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, as tabloid journalism emerged coincident with the New Imperialism, public opinion about the Boer War became quite directly dependent on newspapers. With the New Journalism, the newspaper-reading public was a far wider collection of people in 1899 than it had been during any previous British war. But while the popular press thrived on the daily drama of war reporting from South Africa and benefited in circulation figures and influence from the war, the government's colonial and war policies benefited just as much from the success of the halfpenny papers, especially the *Daily Mail*.

To consider terms such as public discourse, public sphere, and public opinion as useful analytical tools for an examination of imperial ideology, we must first understand turn-of-the-century creation of "the public." As Mary Poovey ("Abortion Question"), Judith Butler ("Contingent Foundations"), and other feminist theorists have shown, discourses that presuppose a unified, universal subject, such as arguments that rely on a language of "rights," are implicated in the creation of that subject. The subject, Poovey argues, is a gendered, mythical construction that is deemed to have "personhood" based on an inner essence that must pre-exist it ("Abortion Question" 240). The creation of the "public" by late-nineteenth-century newspapers and political officials can be considered similarly to the ways Poovey and Butler consider the construction of the liberal individual political subject – the system ends up constructing the very subject whose existence it thinks it is acknowledging. In the events of Mafeking Night we see the emergence of a British public that observers had been assuming existed all the while that

they were creating it. The newspapers were considering "what the public wants" while teaching it what to want, and the celebrations of Mafeking Night served as both evidence that there was one "public" in ritain and as example of the effectiveness of the press, in consultation with the military and the Colonial Office, in the creation of that public out of many separate and distinct publics.

WAR AND THE PUBLIC

The Boer War marked an important turning point for imperial Britain. The war, fought by two white armies for control over a land where whites were far outnumbered by indigenous Africans, pitted the British Empire against the farmers (the literal translation of "Boers") of Dutch descent who lived in the two South African republics. In Britain, the Boers were seen as backward, petty tyrants who sought to exploit British settlers in the gold-mining districts of the Witwatersrand. When war was declared in October 1899, it was general knowledge in Britain that the ragged bands ("commandos") of untrained Boer soldiers riding ponies could never mount a credible attack on the British army, and the war would be over by Christmas. But, as Oscar Wilde had said, wars are never over by Christmas, and this one dragged on for almost three years, as British fighting methods, horses, supplies, and health all proved inadequate to the task. Although few British statesmen came out fully against the war, by the war's end the rest of Europe vehemently denounced the British cause and fighting methods, and conflict about the methods employed by the British army resulted in a split in the already divided Liberal party and in public opinion throughout Britain.

From the newspaper coverage of the war in popular and quality dailies to the private correspondence of public figures, writings about the war reveal splits in public opinion and serious new concerns about British imperialism. Concern about British aims in southern Africa had been stirred in late 1895, when entrepreneur Cecil Rhodes' ally Leander Starr Jameson had led an abortive raid against the Boer government of the Transvaal. Jameson had been trying to stir up rebellion among the "uitlanders," the mostly-British foreigners working in the mining district, so Britain could justify annexing the region, and it was easy to portray the Boer War that came three years later as a government-led attempt to achieve what Rhodes had been unable to achieve with the Jameson Raid – a Transvaal in the political control of the British rather than the Boer farmers.

In looking at Mafeking Night, this chapter problematizes the concept of public opinion and its relation to late-Victorian imperialism, examining the assumptions about, for example, race, gender, evolution, and economics under which the ideology of imperialism was operating. It all starts with Mafeking Night – the celebrations that marked that event point to the issues that characterized the rest of the war. The Mafeking Night celebrations have been portrayed as spontaneous, unproblematically patriotic, and at the same time nationally uncharacteristic. That is, they were distinctly un-British: Kipling wrote to William Alexander Fraser shortly after Mafeking Night, "You've seen something that I never suspected lay in the national character – the nation letting itself go."[3] But that hitherto hidden side of the national character was not as spontaneously revealed as Kipling implied: Carrie Kipling noted in her diary on Mafeking Night that it was her husband himself who was responsible for the celebrations at Rottingdean, where he had roused the "inhabitants to celebrate" the relief of Mafeking (quoted in Pinney *Letters* 18).

The events surrounding the relief of Mafeking prove characteristic of both the New Imperialism and the New Journalism. The interlocking of these two developments allowed the Anglo-Boer to be what one soldier called "the last of the gentlemen's wars,"[4] with all the gender, race, and class-based associations inherent in the phrase, but made it also the first of the sensation-mongers' wars. And the sensation journalism that supported the New Imperialism called into question some of the central assumptions behind the concept of the British gentleman.

The press had, since the eighteenth century, been seen as an important influence on "public opinion," as it was defined by government and opposition. But, with the Reform Acts and the Education Act of 1870 creating an expanded and more literate electorate, the late-Victorian press had come to assume an even more significant role in the determination of public opinion. Critics such as J. A. Hobson attributed much power to the press in creating and sustaining mass support for imperialism. But Hobson's critique of imperialism has a strong anti-working-class bias: the public he sees as deluded into supporting imperialism is the workers. Hobson was right to the extent that the new popular press was not aimed at the constituency thought to make up public opinion earlier in the century. The *Daily Mail*, the newspaper Salisbury is reported to have said was "written by office boys for office boys" (quoted in Ensor *England* 313), sought a different public than such venerable organs as *The Times*. It was not until the New Journalism that news-

papers could be said to reach readers who were not at least upper-middle class. The penny dailies (and the threepenny *Times*) aimed at political influence and sought it in the traditional readership of the daily press. But the new halfpennies, starting with the *Daily Mail*, sought huge circulations and the profits that accompanied them. While "public opinion" from the early eighteenth-century origin of the term seems to have meant the opinion of that part of the public that constituted the electorate, public opinion by the time of the Boer War was not so easily defined. The new variety in the press paralleled a new variety of publics: a large, literate electorate and even some of the non-enfranchised – women. (The *Daily Mail* ran regular features directed at its female readers, including fiction and fashion articles.) The Mafeking Night celebrations were the product of the new newspapers' relationships with the new British publics they were creating, and the celebrations, while they would seem to demonstrate "common sense,"[5] natural support for imperialism in turn-of-the-century Britain, actually reveal that such support was carefully manufactured through the press by a careful manipulation of public opinion(s) to create a very temporary spasm of jingoism.

The jingoism/patriotism of Mafeking Night helped to rally national and, indeed, imperial sentiment behind a war that had not been going well. Because of a series of British setbacks early in the war, it had become important that something potent emerge to bring Britons together in support of the conflict. A symbol would need to evoke sentiments that could unite Britons, whether or not they supported Joseph Chamberlain in the Colonial Office, the embattled War Office, or the war itself. The million-circulation *Daily Mail* and its allies in the new popular journalism of the late 1890s handed the British government the answer: The siege of Mafeking, with its strong, masculine hero in Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, its plucky British civilians (including the elegant Lady Sarah Wilson) making the best of a bad lot, and its loyal African population rallying behind the Union Jack, was a war publicist's dream. The popular press beat the drum for Britain, and, while it did not succeed in converting the nation wholesale into jingoes, it managed nevertheless to produce in Mafeking Night itself a spectacle of English enthusiasm for empire that united class with class and provided an image of imperial solidarity to inspire much-needed support for the war.

By the 1899 start of the Boer War, imperialism had entered British public discourse in countless ways; John MacKenzie's work on propaganda and empire points to the myriad symbols of empire in everyday

life by the turn of the century. Everything from biscuit tins to advertisements to schoolbooks, as Kathryn Castle shows, reminded Britons of "their" empire. Edward Said talks of the place of imperialism in the works of "Ruskin, Tennyson, Meredith, Dickens, Arnold, Thackeray, George Eliot, Carlyle, Mill – in short, the full roster of significant Victorian writers" (*Culture* 126), and of the ways the British imperial identity affected the world view of such figures as they came to "identify themselves with this power" (*Culture* 127) that was imperialism. Literature played a significant part in the development of an imperial imaginary – images and myths about the empire working in conjunction with "facts" coming from the empire – that was necessary to sustain British public support for the economic project of empire.[6] The final chapter of this book takes up the issue of literary figures and their relation to imperialism during the Boer War. For the purposes of this first chapter, however, I would like to examine the ways the average newspaper-reading public came to "identify [itself] with this power" of imperialism. Rather than tracing imperial themes in literature, as many excellent recent studies have done, this volume examines assumptions about British imperialism and what sustained it in public discourse about the Boer War as well as analyzing the ways various kinds of public discourse functioned to support and critique that imperialism.

MAFEKING MYTH

Despite or perhaps because of the strategic unimportance of the town, the siege of Mafeking became a myth almost as soon as the town was encircled by Boer troops in October 1899. The importance of the myth of Mafeking has been noted, especially in Brian Gardner's study of *Mafeking: A Victorian Legend*. The present chapter seeks to trace the myth's origins in the contemporary press treatments of the siege and to examine the importance of the myth-making function of the popular press within the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century. Much cultural studies work on the ideology of imperialism has underplayed the importance of newspapers or seen their role in image-making as relatively straightforward. Anne McClintock, for example, in *Imperial Leather*'s insightful analysis of newspaper photographs, advertisements, and illustrations, devotes almost no attention to the text that surrounded much of the visual material. When she quotes newspapers, it is as historical evidence. But even during the Boer War, commentators were already formulating analyses of the ideological function of the news-

papers, the music halls, the schools, and the pulpits. An examination of such contemporary critiques reveals a complicated picture of how imperialism functioned culturally in turn-of-the-century Britain. J. A. Hobson, W. T. Stead, Olive Schreiner, and other anti-war writers, as well as those writing on the other side, recognized popular culture, including the press, as essential to the war effort. Starting with an examination of Mafeking Night and then moving to more detailed analyses of aspects of writing about the South African War, this volume seeks to shift cultural studies' approach to the late-Victorian empire. As McClintock, Preben Kaarsholm, and others have pointed out, late-Victorian imperialism was not a cultural monolith: support for the empire coexisted with critiques of aspects of the capitalism that helped to drive it; working-class jingoism sat uneasily with patriotic Britons from other classes who might or might not support the war; the rights of Africans were invoked on the pro- and anti-war sides, with equally vain results. The complexity of the ideologies of imperialism during the Boer War is borne out by this study of a range of texts and authors, all of which were elements in a culture in which empire was assumed and yet critiqued, was understood and yet always needed to be explained, was far away and yet appeared at the breakfast table every morning.

During the last decades of Victoria's reign, as John MacKenzie's work has shown, images of empire abounded in advertising, popular literature and theater, exhibitions, and other cultural spaces. But being inundated with evidence of empire is not the same as supporting the economic or political ideal of British imperialism. Such imperial advocates as H. Rider Haggard bemoaned through the 1880s and 1890s the British public's lack of interest in its own empire. Occasional periodical articles addressed imperial issues, but even the Zulu War and the first conflict with the Boers failed to rouse the British from cozy domestic concerns. The Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, however, was different. It was a long, large-scale war with another white nation, it cost millions of pounds of public money, and it couldn't help but catch the interest of the British public very decisively. The press followed the events of the war in such detail that Haggard decided by the end of the war to give up the idea of writing a series of articles on South Africa for the *Daily Express* – people were sick and tired of constantly reading about South Africa, he said. The key factor in igniting public interest in this imperial conflict was the new popular press of the late 1890s, the cheap, sensation-oriented jingoist reporting and editing that was already known as the New Journalism. The New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century,