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THE SHAME OF NOT BELONGING: NAVIGATING FAILURE IN THE COLONIAL PETITION, SOUTH AFRICA 1910-1961

Will Jackson

Introduction

On the 21 April 1921 a man named B. F. Amos wrote a letter from his home in Durban to Prince Arthur of Connaught, the Governor General of South Africa. Amos was an old soldier, having twice enlisted for British military campaigns in German East Africa during the First World War. In 1920 his wife died, leaving him with four children to bring up on his own. Ineligible for a military pension and out of work, Amos needed help. “Your Excellency will observe the increased responsibility thrown upon me in the aspect of caring for my four motherless children,” he wrote. At just 250 words, his letter was brief. Besides detailing his military experience – he gave the dates of his enlistment, the regiments with which he served and the certification of his character (“very good”) on his discharge certificates – Amos gave no other information about his life in South Africa, his previous employment, his experience of war or his hopes for the future. Indeed, his letter feels disembodied, as if blanched of any emotional content. To that extent it fulfilled the normative template of the colonial petition by being written, as it were, without subjectivity. The following few lines only hint at how Amos felt:

Your Excellency will observe with sympathy not unmixed with great anxiety the continual increase of unemployment throughout the Union arising from many varied causes. Among these numbers I also am included. I have been out of work for some five months now and the continued strain upon my health and other resources is undermining my status.¹

That Amos's letter to the Governor was marked by restraint is perhaps not so surprising. Imperial masculinity, we know, relied upon the suppression of emotion. Excessive or unconstrained emotions were associated with "lesser types" – women, children and "native" races. Being a white man in Africa at the height of empire demanded strict emotional self-control.² Notably, where Amos did talk of emotions, he imputed feelings of "sympathy and anxiety" to the Governor. The early 1920s was a moment when concern over white poverty in South Africa – what contemporaries understood as the poor white problem – was taking hold of the public imagination. In a society where racial categorisation relied on strict social and spatial segregation, "poor whites" could never be merely a humanitarian problem (eliciting sympathy) but a political one as well (eliciting anxiety). In appealing for aid, Amos configured his own misfortune as part of a wider social problem: to relieve his distress would be to contribute to the wellbeing of the colony itself.

South African historians and historians of empire more widely have written at length on the ideological problems – and opportunities – presented by so-called "poor whites".³ Significantly, however, the majority of this work has focused on attempts to manage or control them. Far more elusive have been the voices of poor whites in their own words: when they do appear they have tended to appear within the archives of institutions (jails, reformatories, lunatic asylums) dedicated to their control.⁴ In the rare instances in which socially marginal Europeans have gained their own authorial voice – when, for example, they have written and published their memoirs – they have done so as something else: life-writing itself achieved a transformation of status, from "poor white" to "adventurer", "wanderer" or "beachcomber". These lives were then invested with romantic, picaresque appeal.⁵

The archive containing Amos's application for support does provide, however, a collection of almost 1,500 letters written by English-speaking men and women who, finding themselves in varying degrees of impoverishment or distress, wrote to the South African

Governor General appealing for aid.⁶ They did so in relation to a charity – the Governor General’s Fund – set up after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and maintained until South Africa’s departure from the British Commonwealth in 1961. Intended to support disabled British war veterans, its title rendered not only the office but the person of the Governor General as characteristically benign. This followed a long tradition of extending the sovereignty of emperors, chiefs and kings through their exercise of mercy or compassion.⁷ It was not only former soldiers who applied to the fund, however. Some requested passage back to Britain or to other parts of the empire.⁸ Others asked for work. Some requested a one off payment in cash, a donation of livestock or a parcel of land.⁹ Many requested a loan, promising to return the money once fortunes had been restored.¹⁰ Others asked for a pair of shoes or a suit of clothes.¹¹ One man requested a donkey.¹² Another asked for a set of new teeth.¹³

Here then is a corpus of life-writing that offers new insight into the micro-politics of intimacy and empire. In aggregate, these letters reveal the imperial deserving poor – as constructed from below. But intruding into that construction were subversive elements: long and convoluted accounts of personal lives, admissions of failure, expressions of exasperation and other untoward emotion. Understanding this discourse through the lens of Michel Foucault’s power-knowledge nexus is complicated here not so much by the fact that petitioners were without power but because their powerlessness was precisely what they wrote about.¹⁴ Yet as Tiffany Willoughby-Herard has argued, in colonial South Africa white misery was as important to white supremacy as white privilege: the identification of white poverty and its attempted reparation underwrote the continued subordination of indigenous people.¹⁵ Powerlessness could be supportive or subversive of colonial logics of dispossession and entitlement: how petitioners failed – that is, how they wrote their failure – mattered.

Historians have written at length on letters written by white settlers and other colonial personnel but the majority of this work has focused on letters sent between family members, back and forth between colony and metropole and across imperial networks. Letter-writing, it has been argued, played an important part in maintaining and reworking emotional connections, both to the close relations of kith and kin and to the wider ‘imagined communities’ in which imperial families were located.¹⁶ Letters to the Governor General were of a different genre. The Governor was not a person with whom petitioners had a relationship: these letters were not of the same order of privacy or intimacy as letters sent to blood relations. Yet – as Ravi de Costa has argued – every petition is an interaction of the identity of the petitioner and the authority being petitioned.¹⁷ As a representative of the British crown, and a figurehead for the imperial state, the Governor was imagined by the British in South Africa as an object of emotional attachment as well as a symbol of political power, a target for the expression of loyalty and affection – what we might term affective tribute – and an allegorical pater familias, a settler colonial family head.

Letters to the Governor General were (of course) anything but private. Though addressed to him, they were read and evaluated by government committee. And yet, it was the notion that a petitioner could have the Governor’s ear – that a dialogue could be had between a man or woman at the social margins and the man at the very apex of the colonial social order – that gave these letters their quasi-private, near-illicit quality and their peculiar emotional aspect. In addressing the Governor directly, and in sharing with him the content of their private lives, petitioners assumed a particular kind of confidence, positioning their recipient not so much as an august head of state but as a confessor or a friend.¹⁸ In writing of their failure, moreover, petitioners were forced not only to confront but to emphasise their immiserated state. This was transgressive for two reasons. First, though petitioners attempted to write within the formal conventions of the official letter, the difficulty of accounting for

failure within these conventions led many applicants to write at length on the idiosyncrasies of their “private” family lives. The roles of donor and recipient that the letters presupposed may have reiterated existing hierarchies but the intimacies they invoked pushed constantly at the boundaries of public decorum and emotional self-control. While the business of government was intended to be cool, calm and dispassionate, these letters invoked frayed nerves, suppurating bodies and fraught relations. Indeed, the sending of the letter itself – stained, creased, hand-written and at points indecipherable – marked the intrusion into the “public” world of government administration the noise, the heat and the clamour of the “private” world beyond.

In a settler colonial context, failure was taboo. In the years after 1910, the political and economic future of South Africa and its consolidation within a British imperial world rested on the arrival of substantial numbers of English-speaking immigrants and their successful integration into colonial society.¹⁹ Within settler discourse, no room was made for the man or woman whose fortunes foundered. For a would-be settler to ask for help or – worse – to request a passage home was to admit defeat in the imperial project that was the building of a ‘neo-Britain’ overseas. Disdainful talk of degenerate “poor whites” and the danger they posed to the public good reverberated through the inner worlds of those who were themselves poor. In that light the petitions sent to the Governor General give new insight into the subjectivities of what Harald Fischer-Tiné termed “white subalternity” – hardly an insignificant phenomenon when as many as ten percent of the settler population in South Africa were classed as “poor white”.²⁰

It is for these reasons that colonial begging letters can be said to represent a distinct discursive form, one that was both animated and constrained by the tension between the dissembling of failure and its disclosure, as applicants conformed to the language of an imperial deserving poor yet discovered in the act of writing to the Governor himself –

personal representative of the British crown no less – a novel chance to write without restraint. Petitioning authority, as historians in a range of historical contexts have shown, always demanded a balance between deference and critique – but that balance was jeopardised in turn by the sensation on the part of the petitioner that in the act of writing they had found a space for self-disclosure – to write, as it were, unburdened.²¹ Whereas theorists of compassion have tended to see it as predicated upon and constitutive of distance, the anomalous aspect to colonial begging letters is their forging of nearness, in their total compression of social distance. Only the fact that the vast majority of these petitions were rejected reminds us that that distance was perpetually in the process of being restored.²²

The conclusion to Amos' case is missing from his case file. The most likely conclusion to draw is that this was the final appeal that he sent; the results of his previous appeals would suggest that this one too was unsuccessful. Evidence from other cases, however, suggests, that when applicants appealed for help, authorities opened investigations into the existence of other family members who could make themselves responsible for their support – persons to whom the applicant belonged. Belonging meant liability: at colonial ports poor and undesirable would-be settlers were prevented from landing to prevent their “becoming a burden on the state”; charitable organisations kept dossiers on those they dealt with to ensure that nobody who should be contributing assistance was failing to do so; and when hospitals and asylums admitted destitute patients they sought out friends or family members who might be able to take responsibility for the costs of their care. The question, “to whom does this person belong?” had a double meaning, therefore. Belonging could mean attachment to a family or a state; both were configured as institutions for the disbursement of support. When family was absent, the state, as embodied in the figure of the Governor General, served as surrogate, if only to provide the means to allow a destitute Briton passage “home” to the land of his birth.

Letters to the Governor General invoked this dual relationship – between the individual and his or her family and between the individual and the imperial state. Applicants claimed deserving status on the basis of the accomplishments of their forebears while insisting on their own loyal service to settler South Africa. “Penniless” William Pringle claimed to be the great grand-nephew of Thomas Pringle the poet, who landed with British settlers at Algoa Bay (modern day Port Elizabeth) in 1820 and whose writing did much to mythologise British settlement at the Cape.²³ Arthur Hulley, who wrote to the Governor repeatedly over a fifteen year period from 1922 to 1937, claimed to be a grandson of the 1820 settlers. His family’s services “on active duty” dated from 1820 through to the First World War. The siege of Mafeking was the high point in this story. There were nine members of the family “in khaki during the siege”, Hulley wrote, and hundreds of heads of cattle were given by the family to supply the British garrison in the town.²⁴ Men, especially, contrasted their present distress with the heroism of earlier exploits. “I am starving and a pioneer of the Rand”, wrote G. J. Bosman.²⁵ Others catalogued their entire military careers. E. Brander claimed to have fought in the Crimea, in China during the Boxer rebellion and in South Africa during the “Kaffir wars” and had given garrison service in Ireland, Aden, India and Abyssinia.²⁶ Women, significantly, participated in this discourse no less than men, describing the exploits of husbands, fathers, brothers and sons.²⁷

Illustrious antecedents were contrasted with a person’s lack of dependable relations in the present. The only mention Sarrill made of close relations was to “a bad old wife who I divorced” and “an invalid son, getting worse”. Hulley had a wife and seven children: what was lacking was a wider kin able to accommodate his inability – or unwillingness – to work. “My father,” wrote Ernest Botherhill in 1920, “made the first buck wagon in Port Natal” but at the time of writing Botherhill had “only one sister...as poor as I”.²⁸ Katherine Carbutt, writing in 1939 from Isipingo Beach south of Durban, was the daughter of the late Sir

Melmoth Osborn – “a most illustrious, firm and true empire builder” – but the “creeping paralysis” he had suffered in his old age had exhausted the family funds.²⁹ Writing in this vein placed the fact of a person’s material distress within the more emotive frame of their social isolation. Doing so appealed to patriotic feeling. In the British imperial imagination, the image of the alienated Briton, shipwrecked or held in captivity, marked, in Linda Colley’s words, “the frontiers of Britain’s fears, insecurities and deficiencies”.³⁰ Since the Napoleonic Wars Distressed British Seamen legislation had worked to rescue stranded mariners, washed up in foreign ports. As the empire expanded and the numbers of British emigrants increased, Distressed British Seamen morphed into Distressed British Subjects. Repatriation was necessary not just for humanitarian reasons but to uphold British honor overseas. “Putting the question of humanity aside”, as one official noted, “there is the expediency of avoiding a public scandal”. “It would be discreditable to the English name,” wrote another, “that such persons should be allowed to wander about in a denuded and half-starved condition.”³¹

Petitioners to the Governor-General placed themselves within this discursive tradition. They worked at pathos through graphic accounts of their material privation but they achieved it also through the idea of their being out of place, cut off from a familiar, British world. “The ways out here are so different,” wrote Marian Foster in 1933, “I feel right out...I am a lonesome person here.”³² Theresa Todd claimed the South African climate was making her ill and her South African in-laws were unable to offer help. “I have my own people at home,” she promised, “only too willing to help us once we get to England.”³³ William Bowers, who in 1926 had been in South Africa over twenty years, wanted to know if the Governor would have him, his wife and their five children shipped to England – where he would be able to support his family “through relations”.³⁴

Both Todd and Bowers insisted that they did not want charity; rather, their passage home would represent the natural benevolence of a just regime. “I am a true English woman

and could not beg,” wrote Todd. “Writing from one Englishman to another”, wrote Bowers, “I trust Your Excellency will have us all repatriated to our native land where we may be allowed to exist in freedom.”³⁵ Petitioners such as these sought to claim belonging. Bowers and Todd had family back in Britain from whom they might receive support but they also claimed an emotional connection to Britain as their “native” land. Petitioners worked hard to insist on their British credentials, denying that time spent in South Africa diluted their loyalty to the mother country. “I am English,” stressed Sara Gowie, “and although I have been many years in this country I am still British and my lads, although born here are British too. Could you kindly help me home?”³⁶ South Africa in these accounts was configured as a place of destitution from which passage to England was described as both rescue and relief. To be stranded was to be, by definition, in a foreign land: petitioners who described themselves as friendless or as strangers made in the process, therefore, a subtle critique of British imperialism. Separation from family echoed an estrangement from the familiar – and a challenge to the idea that Britain itself was being replenished and renewed in South Africa.³⁷ In this light, the fact that the greatest volume of begging letters date from the 1910s and 1920s can be explained not only by the effects of economic depression or the legacy of the First World War but by the rise of a new and aggressive version of Afrikaner nationalism then challenging the assumption that South Africa formed an integral part of a British world.³⁸

A discourse of rescue, whether from poverty or from South Africa itself, was ambiguous: failure both called upon and jeopardised notions of national honour and white prestige. Petitioners described in detail the indignity of their poverty, its debilitating effects on their health and the humiliation of their descent from respectability. “I am writing from the diamond diggings, which I consider to be a prison”, wrote John Barnard, “for I am absolutely down and out in the world and have no fit clothing for a white man to enter town.” Here,

Barnard attempted to balance the respectful tone appropriate to his addressing the Governor-General (“I humbly appeal to Your Highness” he began) with a sufficient emphasis on the severity of his position (“...to help me out of the gravest difficulty that ever a man was placed in”.) His mention of the need to enter town dressed appropriately for a white man showed he recognised the importance of white prestige but hinted too at its constrictive – imprisoning – effects. Describing failure this way offered an indictment on the false promise of colonial settlement and a rebuke to the imperial state.

Like other petitioners, Barnard appealed for justice. Of Afrikaans background, Barnard had volunteered to serve with South African troops in East Africa and on the Western Front during the First World War. Did the Governor think it reasonable, he wanted to know, that a man who had “shed my blood for your country” was reduced to arduous physical work that aggravated his wounds? Though he did not specify when or how he had been hurt, Barnard described his injury “about 9 inches long and 2 inches broad across both shoulders”. “I have to take my coat off when I commence work,” Barnard explained, “as you no doubt know, the climate here is very hot, the sun is scorching [and] I find it impossible to work in the sun for any length of time with such a tender wound.”

These were difficult explanations to give. Describing physical incapacity in such graphic detail took petitioners dangerously close to the prevailing stereotype of the “won’t work” – the man who preferred to find excuses to avoid galvanising, honest toil. One man admitted that the “pick and shovel work” was too hard for him due to the fever he had suffered in German East Africa during the First World War; another complained of the “repeated wear and tear” of a life time’s manual labour and military service taking “all the elastic out of my muscles”.³⁹ Letters such as these demanded that petitioners write in intimate detail about their bodies – about their illnesses, their injuries, their infirmities. In cases of returned soldiers, the fact that their injuries were sustained in the service of the empire

implied a sense of honour unmatched and a debt unfulfilled. “I beg you to stand by me as I willingly did by my king in the dark days gone by,” Barnard wrote. In other cases men and women wrote candidly of the effects of their poverty on their bodies and minds. Writing from a convalescent home in 1912, Thomas Fawkes described the rheumatic fever he had been suffering since the 1899-1902 war. Unable to work, and homeless for the past year, his wife had “since broken down under the strain”. Fawkes requested a “cast off suit” to help him secure employment.⁴⁰ “Since I landed in Africa,” wrote Miriam Pratt ten years later, “I have had nothing but a dog’s life. I am feeling so depressed and ill...my nerves are so shattered that I do not know how to live here any longer.”⁴¹ Other petitioners wrote their distress through a language of worry, strain and nervous exhaustion.⁴²

Consistently, writers sought to express a feeling of grievance: that their failure represented an injustice that demanded setting right. That required expressing outrage but only to a very limited degree. “Do you think it fair treatment,” asked Barnard, for “an ex-soldier who had shed his blood for the empire to be stranded at the diggings?” While the conventions of the formal letter gave a structure by which applicants could contain their experience of poverty and distress, the ability of petitioners to conform to these conventions was threatened by the very notion that they had the ear of the man who embodied the imperial state itself. This could reveal itself in excessive emotion: attempts to strike an intimate, familiar tone could seem unwarranted or ridiculous; expressions of deference or devotion read as sycophantic.⁴³ But petitioners most grievously deviated from the script when their distress was expressed in anger. Hostile feelings ruptured the reciprocity between (magnanimous) donor and (grateful) recipient. “I was with the late Cecil Rhodes for years”, wrote Albert Fynn, a one-time native commissioner in Southern Rhodesia, “and this is the outcome of my duty”.⁴⁴ Distress in these accounts was configured as a betrayal of British imperialism, but the appearance of what we might call non-normative emotion – anger, rage,

indignation, despair – marked petitioners out as unreliable recipients of government aid. It was precisely in these moments, however, that the begging letters yield their most revealing content. G. H. Rheeder, who had served in East Africa during the First World and returned badly disabled from enteric fever, claimed to have “done his work for the empire”. “My honour,” he wrote “I must tell you I suffer badly”:

As I can do nothing for myself I must sit and die of misery, with my wife and six children. People with whom nothing is the matter draw money. The man who did his work and sacrificed himself for the King must perish and the others who have sheltered behind our blood draw pensions...I and my children are naked. Each has just a dress or a pair of trousers. If we wish to wash them it must be at night....Our living is obtained from the Natives, stamp mealies or kaffir corn. We have nothing from which we can live.⁴⁵

To invoke race in applications such as these was dangerous: nothing marked out a lack of imperial self-respect as did a person’s dependency on indigenous people. In a passage such as this, however, recourse to race offered the most emphatic illustration of what Rheeder claimed was an imperial injustice. His own shame – at his reliance on Africans for food and the raggedness of his children – was set up not as his alone but of the empire which had failed him. Other petitioners also invoked race to illustrate the depths of their despair. Annie Dillon was reduced to wearing an African’s boots.⁴⁶ Wallace Dove described himself as forced to “work more than a kaffir”.⁴⁷ “Many a time,” wrote Jessie Cork, “I have been disgusted to think I was English and could be treated worse than a Black woman. There is more mercy for them than us.”⁴⁸ In letters such as these white poverty was portrayed as a dereliction of a

racial hierarchy that not only organised the colonial economy but also generated national and individual self-esteem.

In other instances, however, a very different dynamic was at work, by which settler failure was presented not as the subversion of racial hierarchy but as a consequence of it. In these letters the primary distinction was not between hopes and disappointments or promises and their betrayal but between the racial consciousness of South Africa's two white nations, the British and the Afrikaners. We see this dynamic most clearly in two petitions sent in 1939 and 1952 respectively that pertain to two South Africans who admitted to being of "mixed race". As in other cases already discussed, their letters were framed by the tension between the suppression of emotion and its expression. Like other petitions, they narrated their life-history around their separation from family. What distinguished them was that, while both petitioners were born in South Africa, both sought return to Britain. Return in these letters did not merely reference the fact that the writers had spent time in Britain in the past; rather, it implied that Britain, not South Africa, was their rightful place of belonging. How that connection was made and how the urgency of their leaving South Africa was conveyed reveals a great deal about the changing nature of South African society at this time.

C. W. Brooks wrote to the Governor in April 1939. He had served in the South-West African campaign of 1914-15, after which he worked his passage to London. There he joined another regiment and served at the Somme and at Ypres where he lost his right eye. Returning to London, Brooks worked for a time in a factory and subsequently in a pharmacy. When he failed the exams to become a qualified pharmacist, Brooks sailed for Canada. Only in 1936 did he return to South Africa, after almost twenty years living and working in Canada and the USA.⁴⁹ Like so many other applicants, Brooks described separation from family as both an emotional cost of empire and a motivating force for migration: on returning to South Africa Brooks discovered that he was "an alien in all but actual truth". He went on:

Everything has changed, even the relationship between me and my people. The incompatibility is so marked that I could not live with them and...as for help it is simply non-existent where they are concerned. So it will be seen that even the country of my birth, the country for which I had surrendered my life to its active service, does its utmost first to rob me of my self-respect and sense of decency and furthermore the ghastly realisation of its intention to starve me to death gradually.

As it went on Brooks' letter grew more grandiose – and more obscure. The South African climate was not suited to his nerves, he argued, which “lost tone” in the South African heat; England, not South Africa, was his “spiritual home”. “I am now in a strange land,” he wrote, “so nerve-wracking to me I must get away or ultimately land upon the rocks.” Mid-way through his account, Brooks conceded what was at the heart of his alienation. “My ancestry is somewhat mixed,” he conceded, “which I believe includes English, Scotch, Spanish and St. Helena.” Brooks then hinted at the cause of his financial impoverishment:

Probably my skin [being] a little suntanned is a reason for my not being able to secure employment... Being unemployed I must perforce stay among a beastly lot of people. It seems destined to be that I am dropping lower and lower the longer I remain as such in this country. The position is now impossible. It is getting desperate.

Invoking England as a “spiritual home” was intended to compensate for or mask the fact of Brooks' mixed ancestry – as if Englishness could be gained on the strength of an individual's desire for it. But Brooks denied that his family past had any connection with his skin colour.

Brooks recognised that other South Africans saw in his skin the evidence of racial difference but attributed his darkness to the effects of the sun, the same thing that he identified as responsible for his damaged nerves. Invoking health this way cast South African racial attitudes as the cause of his unjust destitution: the sun stood as metaphor for the exclusionary politics of race.

Unlike Brooks, who wrote to the Governor General, Elizabeth Findlater wrote directly to the Queen of England. Findlater was the South African born wife of a Scottish man who in 1952 was employed as a hospital attendant on the mail ship, the Edinburgh Castle, then docked at Southampton while Findlater and her children were living in Elsie's River, a working class suburb of Cape Town. Findlater's case represented the inverse of a phenomenon common much earlier in the twentieth century, when British men migrated alone to South Africa in the hope that they would bring out their dependents once they had settled and made a home. The previous year, Findlater's husband had gone to sea, "thinking he would be able to find a small home for us in England". He failed. "Oh Your Majesty," Findlater wrote, "I implore you, please help us. Even someone's empty stable or garage." The Governor General's office through which the letter passed turned down the request, the application judged ineligible on multiple counts. What is remarkable is that Findlater herself seemed to anticipate the difficulties that would obstruct the realisation of her plan to "return". "Like most South Africans," she wrote, "I am of mixed parentage. If my appeal on this ground is made known I shall be refused a passport. Please, Madam, do not let this be known."⁵⁰

In writing to Queen Elizabeth directly, Findlater saw in the British crown a potential source of rescue from the consequences of South African racial classification. Just two years earlier the apartheid government had passed the Population Registration Act, requiring every South African to be classified according to one of four racial groups.⁵¹ It nonetheless seems

strange that Findlater would seek to position the Queen of England as her confidante. Did she not guess that her letter would be read by others besides the Queen or, indeed, that it would not be read by the Queen at all? And yet it was precisely the idea that these letters comprised a direct channel between ruler and ruled that generated their capacity for self-disclosure.⁵² For Findlater, Queen Elizabeth embodied the possibility for a reprieve from apartheid racialisation; disclosing her mixed race status was to admit to what in Elsie's River was a source of both impoverishment and shame. Whereas petitioners in the 1920s had appealed to "get away" so as to avoid being stranded without family or work, Findlater sought refuge from the racializing exactions of South Africa's new political regime.

Other petitions submitted in the period between the election of the National Party to power in 1948 and the withdrawal of South Africa from the British Commonwealth in 1961 expressed similar apprehensions towards what has been termed the Afrikanerisation of the South African state.⁵³ "I am a simple old man," wrote P. J. Ringer in 1960, "a retired professional hunter, transport rider and farmer". His father had come to South Africa from Suffolk in 1878, had fought in the Zulu wars and in the Boer wars of 1881 and 1899 and Ringer's great grandfather had been amongst the "first batch" of the 1820 settlers to land at Algoa Bay. "All our relations", he emphasised, "have kept themselves pure British". Now, Ringer wrote, "we are being handed over to our enemies, the Boers". Ringer's letter was written entirely on the grounds of imperial loyalty – of his aversion to "this horror of a Republic". Indeed, his letter contains no request for repatriation or financial aid; royal intervention to prevent South Africa becoming a republic was, it appears, his only concern. Although the letter was consistent with the "loyal British colonist" tradition, its request of rescue in the form of political intervention rather than repatriation or financial aid marked out his appeal. So too did the hostility he expressed for South Africa's Boer – or Afrikaner –

population. “They are a mixed breed, waded with hate for everything British”, Ringer wrote, before adding a postscript:

Dr. Verwoerd is fond of stating that the white man made South Africa. He should continue and say that the Afrikaner has always fought progress and that the white man who made South Africa is the 1820 British Settlers, assisted by the Black Man. The Afrikaner has always been nothing but a nuisance and will always, until exterminated, be nothing more than a pest.⁵⁴

These were Ringer’s final words. The question of how his petition should be responded to was solved by the fact that at the time of his writing Ringer was living in Southern Rhodesia and did not “belong” to South Africa. Not the least remarkable aspect of his letter, however, is what we might describe as its rising emotional temperature. Ringer’s hostility towards Afrikaners intensified as his letter progressed; its content is most oblique yet most revealing in its closing words. Talk of extermination recalled Joseph Conrad’s famous words – “exterminate all the brutes” – signifying the corruption of the imperial ideology of a civilising mission.⁵⁵ In writing of his aversion to South Africa’s Afrikaners, Ringer was attempting to show his commitment to British imperialism in the sub-continent but his genocidal imagination parodied British desires for ascendancy. His commitment to British domination in South Africa was, in any case, anachronistic. By 1960 the British Government was reconciled to South Africa’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth and the repatriation to Britain of what was left of the British state. As other settler colonies in Africa became independent – Kenya in 1963 and Southern Rhodesia in 1980 – the language of British settlers becoming stranded or marooned only became more widespread.

Conclusion

The letter with which this essay began – that of Mr. Amos of Durban – was telling for its entwining of one man's poverty around the larger problem of white unemployment. Amos' distress was not his alone but a problem for anyone concerned with white prestige and the successful development of South Africa within the British Empire. In that respect, Amos' letter was representative of petition writing more broadly. The key to the plausible petition was the presentation of poverty or distress as consistent with the idea of British imperialism as embodied in the crown and its representative in South Africa, the Governor General. That meant, first of all, conforming to an epistolary style in which emotion was controlled.

Credible petitions relied on conveying certain temperamental attributes to soften or redeem a settler's failure. In this light, what made a persuasive account was the ability of the writer to channel and constrain their sense of grievance. Above all, the need to rectify failure had to be cast as an imperial imperative. The rescue from destitution of men and women who had given loyal service to the empire was depicted as the necessary extension of national honour.

Begging letters failed when the fact of failure became decoupled from the heroic narrative of imperial wars, "pioneering" and the building of a white – specifically British – colonial state.

The apparently intimate space afforded by the letter itself, however, led many petitioners to express themselves in ways that contradicted this style. In some cases, these read as extreme or egregious departures. Petitioners who gave full voice to their despair tarnished the ideal of the resourceful, resilient British colonist, while those who wrote at length on the malevolence of those they blamed for their misfortune were liable to be judged obsessive or deluded.⁵⁶ In only a small number of cases does evidence survive showing the Fund's deliberations as to the deserving or undeserving nature of a petition but they reveal nevertheless some of the terms by which applications were disqualified. Several petitioners

were found to have broken the law. Others were known to drink.⁵⁷ One woman, claiming to have been deserted by her husband, was later found to be living unmarried with another man.⁵⁸ In another case, the fact that a couple wrote repeatedly and in extensive detail of their hardships led officials at the Fund to judge their stories to be false. “One cannot help feeling sorry for people who are reduced to extreme destitution,” noted the committee chair, “though in this case the frequency and tone of the appeals for help suggest that the couple may have become professional beggars.”⁵⁹

A letter’s tone was indeed critical. Self-pity could appear comic; a too-elaborate account of a person’s misfortune might be read as grandiose. Preventing the machinations of “the professional beggar” was a preoccupation for imperial authorities across the empire; in South Africa this figure merged with that other archetypal deviant – “the undesirable” – in the minds of officials always wary of bad or dishonest character eroding the quality of immigrant stock. Yet by the 1950s, the number of petitions sent to the Governor General had significantly reduced. In part, this was due to the development of a social welfare infrastructure across South Africa but it also reflects the fact that after 1948 the office of the Governor General was no longer occupied by a British politician. Once the National Party came to power, there simply were no high officials within the South African state to which failed British settlers could emotionally relate. The declining visibility of failure amongst English-speaking settlers within South African archives, then, directly relates to the much larger imperial failure to keep South Africa a part of a British world.⁶⁰ What the several thousand letters handled by the Governor General’s staff after 1910 together reveal is the attempt by their authors to write of failure in ways that embellished the power of the imperial state and that were consistent with the supporting myths of white settlement. To that end, failure gave the anti-heroes of empire voice – and to would-be pioneers the opportunity to hold both Britain and South Africa to account.

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¹ South African National Archives (hereafter, SANA), Pretoria, SAB, GG 41/436, B. F.

Amos to Governor-General, 21 April 1921.

² Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, 199-214.

³ Arnold, 'European Orphans'; De, *Marginal Europeans*; Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*; Davie, *Poverty Knowledge*; Bottomley, *Poor White*; Muller, *Bad Frenchmen*. For fictional accounts, see Cairnie, *"Imperialists in Broken Boots"*.

⁴ Ernst, *Mad Tales*; Roos, 'Work Colonies'; Fischer-Tiné, 'Hierarchies of Punishment'; Swartz, *Homeless Wanderers*.

⁵ Roskell, *Six Years*; Couzens, *Tramp Royal*. For references to beachcombers in the South Pacific see Railton, *Grass Huts and Lamb*, *Exploration and Exchange*.

⁶ The majority of these records are contained in the 41 series (subject: 'assistance') of the Governor General's Office archives, held at the South African National Archives Pretoria repository. Others were retrieved from the 30 series ('repatriation and assistance'). Also relevant are cases relating to hospital and mental asylum patients, mostly filed under the 33 series (health).

⁷ Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*.

⁸ From a sample of several hundred, examples include S. F. Stow, GG 41/151, 41/172; J. L. M. Scanlan, GG 31/177; E. Todd, GG 41/356; G. H. Beard, 41/197; R. G. H. Pottle, 41/583;

G. A. Isherwood, GG 41/703; R. H. Richards, GG 41/758; M. Young, GG 41/699; W. Page, GG 41/721, GG 30/84.

⁹ GG 41/190, P. H. Skipworth; GG 41/382, E. Norman; GG 41/518, A. Hill.

¹⁰ GG 41/435, Franz Niemann; GG 41/1098, I. W. May.

¹¹ GG 41/529, Sarah Steele; GG 41/779, J. Bromley.

¹² GG 41/940 and GG 41/1387, E. C. Dunbar.

¹³ GG 41/181 and GG 41/184, M.S. Dee.

¹⁴ In this respect, the letters represent a different body of sources from other colonial discourse as written ‘from below’. See Anderson, *Subaltern Lives* and Paisley and Reid, *Critical Perspectives on Colonialism*. Research on colonial petitions is limited to Schler, “‘The facts stated do not seem to be true’” and van Sittert, ‘Begging Letters’.

¹⁵ Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin*.

¹⁶ Buettner, *Empire Families*, 130-139; Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*; Samuelson, “Community of Letters”; Smith, “Imperial Families”; Gerber, “Immigrant Letters”; Thomas and Eves, *Bad Colonists*; Ishiguro, *Relative Distances*; Rappaport, “‘The Bombay Debt’”. On South Africa, see Stanley, “Migrant Letters.”

¹⁷ De Costa, “Moral Worlds”.

¹⁸ On friendship, see Durba Ghosh’s essay in this issue.

¹⁹ Peberdy, *Selecting Immigrants*, 35-37.

²⁰ Fischer-Tiné, *Low and Licentious Europeans*. The 10% figure is based on the South African census of 1911 and the Department of Labour’s 1916 ‘poor white census’. Anthony J. Christopher, ‘A South African Domesday Book’; Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa*, 43-45.

²¹ Kelly, “Petitions”; Zaret, “Petitions”; de Costa, “Moral Worlds”; Wurgler, “Voices from the Silent Masses”. Besides the article by Wurgler see also the other essays in the *International Review of Social History* supplementary issue, 46:S9 (2001).

²² Berlant, *Compassion*.

²³ GG 41/160, W. H. Pringle to Governor-General, 25 March 1913. Other applicants who claimed descent from the 1820 settlers included H. M. J. Hall (GG 41/477); and Esther Gosling (41/642).

²⁴ GG 41/551, W. T. Hulley to Governor General, 9 November 1922; 27 April 1923, 15 November 1927, 19 November 1932; W.T. Hulley to King George VI, 9 July 1937.

²⁵ GG 41/395, G. J. Bosman to Governor-General, 16 February 1920.

²⁶ GG 41/193, E. Brander. Other who recounted their military exploits include J. Creighan (GG 41/427); R. Crosbie, (GG 41/655), H. Goodridge (GG 51/565), J. L. Lee (GG 41/155 and 41/188), J. Montgomery (GG 41/431) and J. Winter (GG 41/498).

²⁷ Examples include C. J. Burns (GG 41/528), C. Cantwell (GG 41/991); B. Eathorne (GG 1/705); Jessie H. Galloway (GG 41/506), J. A. Kelly (GG 41/552); Mary Kellemyer (GG 41/408), M.J.E. Reid (GG 41/411) and H. R. D. Wreford (GG 41/513)

²⁸ GG 41/413, Ernest Botherhill to Governor General, 2 December 1920.

²⁹ GG 41/909, Katherine Carbutt to Governor General, 15 April 1939

³⁰ Colley, *Captives*, 14.

³¹ UK National Archives, FO 881-4121, British Consul, Budapest, to Marquis of Salisbury, 7 July 1879; W. Stuart, The Hague, to Salisbury, 8 September 1879.

³² GG 41/871, M. Foster to Governor General, 23 January 1933.

³³ GG 41/470, T. A. C. Todd to Governor General, 20 October 1921.

³⁴ GG 41/694, William Bowers to Governor General, 10 January 1926.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ GG 41/315, Sarah Gowie to Governor General, 27 August 1915. On loyalism see Saul Dubow, “How British was the ‘British World’? The Case of South Africa”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37:1 (2009).

³⁷ Others that described themselves as stranded, besides those discussed here, include B. Kushner, GG 41/406; R. H. Richards, 41/758; J. Montgomery, GG 41/431; R.G.H. Pottle, GG 421/583; C. J. Burns, GG 41/528; N. Pohl, GG 41/510 and GG 41/515 and E.J. Mackenzie, GG 41.465.

³⁸ Moodie, *Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism*.

³⁹ GG 41/453, M.J. Muller to Governor General, 21 July 1921; GG 41/498, J. Winter to Governor General, 15 February 1922.

⁴⁰ GG 41/142, Tom Fawkes to Governor General, 7 February 1913.

⁴¹ GG 41/447, Miriam Pratt to Governor General, 13 June 1921.

⁴² G. H Beard (GG 41/497), C. A. Swales (GG 41/606), Evelyn Appleby (GG 41/180); Galloway (GG 41/506); W. J. Mulholland (GG 41/701); S. A. Thomas (GG 41/480); E. Brown (GG 41/680); G. G. Dempers (GG 41/475).

⁴³ GG 41/680, Ellie Brown; GG 41/444, Wallace Dove; GG 41/87, A. E Call; GG 41/173, Alec Edwards; GG 41/730, Ruby Frost; GG 41/67, Cyril Hughes; GG 41/1098, Part II, 116, Sister Mary Domnilla; GG 41/529, Sarah Steele; GG 41/516, G. C. Salloway.

⁴⁴ GG 41/554, C. G. Fynn to Governor General, 28 November 1922.

⁴⁵ GG 41/739, G. N. C. Rheeder to Governor-General, 14 November 1927.

⁴⁶ GG 41/426, A. Dillon to Governor General, 9 November 1922.

⁴⁷ GG 41/444, W. Dove to Governor General, 24 May 1921.

⁴⁸ GG 41/283, J. Cork to Governor General, 1 November 1914.

⁴⁹ GG 30/110, C. W. Brooks to Governor General, 21 April 1939.

⁵⁰ GG 41/1098, Part I, 44, E. Findlater to Her Majesty the Queen, 11 November 1952.

⁵¹ For an analysis of how racialisation proceeded in practice, see Posel, “Race as Common Sense.”

⁵² In several cases, petitioners marked their letters ‘private’ or ‘confidential’, in which case officials had to write back to the petitioner to request their authorisation for their letter to be forwarded to ministers for approval. GG 30/84, A. L. Roode (1931); GG 30/92, E. W. Allison (1932); GG 30/99, Sister Mary Lima (1935).

⁵³ Seegers, “Afrikanerisation of the South African State.”

⁵⁴ GG 1390 41.1098, P. J. Ringer, Melsetter, Rhodesia, to Queen Elizabeth II, 18 October 1960.

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902).

⁵⁶ Doris Sturrock (GG 3/5691); L. K. Hoare (GG 41/744); K. de Montrose (GG 41/719). A. J. Wheatley (GG 33/1833); C. G. Hope (GG 3/881).

⁵⁷ R. Crosbie (GG 41/655); P. H. Sarrill (GG 41-110, 322, 335, 336); P. W. Howe (GG 41/490); M. J. E. Reid (GG 41/411).

⁵⁸ M. Hargrave (GG 41/501).

⁵⁹ John and Evelyn Kyle (GG 41/263, 265, 269, 274).

⁶⁰ The key literature on the expansion of social welfare in South Africa includes Jeremy Seekings, “Not a Single White Person”; Davie, *Poverty Knowledge*; Bonner, “South African Society and Culture.”

Abstract

This essay examines letters of petition sent by failed white settlers in South Africa to the British Governor General. These letters comprise a particular discursive genre that combine aspects of both private and public. The key to their success was controlled emotion: petitioners had to present their distress in such a way as to excite the exercise of compassion.

Allowing subversive or stray emotions to enter a letter was bound to undermine a petitioner's appeal. Reading this epistolary corpus critically allows us to understand the discursive strategies by which colonials claimed a sentimental attachment to Britain, the empire and, indeed, the Governor General himself.

Keywords

Colonial failure, petition, subaltern biography, emotion, poor whites

Bio-notes

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