

## Written with their blood:

### Contemplating death in South Africa in the newspaper poems of 1899-1902

#### Abstract

The South African War of 1899-1902 was a moment of crisis for the British Empire. Though it has been called the high point of British imperialism, its resonances in popular culture texts indicate that the conflict was a source of national trauma and anxiety as well as an occasion for imperial patriotism. This essay explores the ways in which military and civilian poets writing in English for newspaper publication during the war, in Britain and around the world, were particularly troubled by the wartime landscapes of South Africa. I argue that in their representations of soldiers' deaths, newspaper poets perform two related mapping exercises. In a cartography of loss, they reflect anxiously on a terrain strewn with British bodies, which were exposed to the extremity of the South African elements and threatened by the landscape's otherness and apparent emptiness. Meanwhile, other newspaper poems attempt a reparative cartography of remembrance, in which a shared consciousness of buried British bodies and shed British blood could turn topographic locations into beacons in a cultural memory map. Employed by newspaper poets of different political persuasions, these tactics often aimed for patriotic or propagandistic effects, but they simultaneously express uneasiness, about British bodies and British imperial ambitions.

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#### I

When Rudyard Kipling wrote in October 1899 of a 'gentleman in kharki [...] wiping something off a slate', readers were in no doubt about what he meant.<sup>1</sup> The war in South Africa was going to be the second instalment of a story begun two decades earlier, an opportunity to avenge the British defeat at Majuba Hill in 1881. The retreat of the Gordon Highlanders, the death of General Colley and a shocking disparity in losses had been followed by a British surrender that even Queen Victoria felt to be shameful: 'we do not like peace before we have retrieved our honour'; the Boers' annual celebrations of 'Majuba Day' on the anniversary of their victory were a source of ongoing resentment.<sup>2</sup> Kipling's 'Absent-Minded Beggar' offering to 'wipe' the humiliating memory off the 'slate' had real historical counterparts; Fransjohan Pretorius quotes British soldiers in 1899 yelling 'Majuba!' as they stormed formidable Boer positions.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, far from turning away

from the memory, the newspaper poets of the South African War demonstrate an obsessive fascination with the story of Majuba, which stood for both the disgrace of defeat and the necessity of revenge. As war grew imminent over the summer of 1899, newspaper poets looked forward to the prospect of avenging Majuba with an acute consciousness of the British bodies buried there, producing patterns of image and thought which shaped representations of the wartime landscape throughout the conflict.

In the late nineteenth century, poetry appeared in almost every issue of almost every newspaper published in Britain. Moreover, many of the poems which appeared first in London dailies moved around the country and, indeed, the world, in the pages of the local, regional, national, colonial and international press. The well-known poets who made use of newspaper publication – Kipling, Hardy, Swinburne, and poet laureate Alfred Austin – have tended to dominate accounts of the anglophone poetry of the period;<sup>4</sup> in contrast, this article responds to Chapman and Ehnes’ provocation: ‘what would happen to our field if we read the poems that most Victorians read?’<sup>5</sup> The majority of newspaper poetry came from ordinary readers and correspondents, who had ‘thrown’ their contribution ‘into rhyme’ in the hope that ‘it may, in this dress, strike the eye of some who might otherwise have passed it over’, as a contributor to the *Daily News* wrote in December 1899.<sup>6</sup> The work of these anonymous and mostly untraceable figures is not collected in anthologies or volumes, and as a consequence has remained largely invisible to literary scholarship. Meanwhile, contemporary fears that the popular poetry of the South African War was no more than ‘dismal’ or ‘outrageous twaddle’ set the tone for a century of critical neglect.<sup>7</sup> In the only book-length study of the poetry of 1899-1902, a work of prodigious bibliographic research, Malvern Van Wyk Smith describes ‘popular ballads, music hall songs and newspaper doggerel’ as ‘more or less bovinely jingo’; Elleke Boehmer likewise describes the

literature provoked by the South African War as a ‘strident burst of jingoism’.<sup>8</sup> Closer study reveals a more interesting picture, however, of varied newspaper poems speaking to and inspiring a broad constituency of readers and writers who encountered poetry not as the preserve of the literary elite but as a mode of engaging with the events and cultural questions of the day.

Laura Chrisman has shown that imperial romance became increasingly appealing as the British military situation in South Africa deteriorated, its simplistic fictions offering a way of legitimating and idealizing British colonial domination.<sup>9</sup> Popular newspaper poetry played a different role. Written to be read alongside topical content, and (as Boehmer points out), lying ‘closer to a culture’s oral traditions’, poems published in newspapers could ‘offer channels of immediate reaction’ to national crises.<sup>10</sup> Newspaper poetry could be the place where ‘the paper’s politics come through most clearly’, or where voices that contrasted with the publication’s official editorial stance could be heard.<sup>11</sup> It was safe to articulate in poetry doubts and uncertainties which would have been inadmissible in prose, not only thanks to the privilege of anonymity but also because of poetry’s special ability to be playful with voice and character, to sustain points of view in tension, rather than resolving them into straightforward political positions, and to elicit complex and nuanced responses to issues which were elsewhere presented as simple. Poems published in British and colonial anglophone newspapers thus make visible currents of imperial thought, providing evidence of anti-hegemonic anxieties amidst the strident jingoism of the metropolitan imperial press.

To complement primary newspaper archive research, a major source for this essay is a multi-volume scrapbook of clippings compiled in Pietermaritzburg, Natal by Pera

Muriel Button, the wife of British army captain who served during the war.<sup>12</sup> Although Button's clippings usually cut off the surrounding margins, glimpses of paratextual material and the occasional handwritten note indicate that she drew on at least four different South African English-language newspapers. The collection provides a striking illustration of the global circulation of newspaper poetry, featuring poems which appeared first in British dailies and weeklies, in colonial newspapers from Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and in international titles from America and the Philippines, indicating the vast systems of international exchange on which the late Victorian newspaper industry depended, and which enabled some newspaper poems to travel far beyond their original publication contexts. Indeed, late Victorian newspaper poetry existed within complex publication and dissemination networks which also included souvenir pamphlets and music hall, musical and theatrical performances. As texts circulated between these forms, they took on new resonances and were subject to new notes of interference from their surroundings. This essay, with its focus firmly on the newspaper poem, can only gesture towards this rich seam for future research, using footnotes to indicate some of the ways this material travelled around the country, the empire and the world.

The occlusion of the narratives and experiences of Black people during the South African War is not a neutral accident of history but the result of conscious and concerted effort on the parts of colonial officials who acted as gatekeepers to the press. Paula Krebs has shown particularly powerfully how Baden-Powell, for example, insisted that only certain representations of the African community besieged with him and his forces in Mafeking were allowed to reach the British public through Sarah Wilson's *Daily Mail* reports.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, neither their contributions to the defence of the town, nor their starvation as a result of racist inequalities in food rationing, were recognized until much later. The voices and experiences of these men and women are also missing from this

study, which privileges poets with access to the columns of colonial newspapers. The ‘vast colonial intertext’ which constitutes ‘the process of colonialist image-making’ is marked with both flaws and absences: ‘ethnographic, linguistic and even topographical blunders’ and ‘the *presence* of distorting stereotypes’ on the one hand, and on the other ‘the *absence* of representations of an oppressed group’.<sup>14</sup> This essay attempts to pay attention to ‘those matters’, and those people, ‘that are entirely absent, whether actively suppressed or merely deemed insignificant’ – to ‘notice the aporia’, which Lisa Lowe observes are often marked by ‘discrepant tone or insistent repetitions, [...] rhetorical anomalies that obscure omissions, tensions or outright illogic’.<sup>15</sup> In the argument that follows, these aporia are particularly palpable in the poetry’s silences about the populations of indigenous people who occupied the land over which Boer and British forces were fighting; insistently repeated images of emptiness come to feel like a compulsive avoidance strategy.

## II

The imagery of cleansing in Kipling’s ‘The Absent-Minded Beggar’ points to the fact that in 1899, Majuba was a symbol not only of defeat but also of perceived betrayal. In 1881, British politicians had signed a peace deal returning to the Transvaal Republic territory that had been annexed in 1877 – a capitulation which was figured as a stain on British honour, ‘the time when our flag was soiled’, as field intelligence officer Joseph Ingram put it in ‘The Song of the Uitlander’, published in a New Zealand newspaper in 1900.<sup>16</sup> British journalist-poet Harold Begbie described the ordinary people of Britain – ‘the town’, ‘the club’ and ‘the clerk’ – talking of Majuba as ‘a distant, stricken hill’:<sup>17</sup>

[...] a hill where England sorrows, and has shed her bitter tears  
Through the weary, weary waiting of the bitter, bitter years,  
Of a hill where gambling statesmen dug our honour’s shallow grave—  
Dried our blood with coward parchment, and bowed down before a knave!<sup>18</sup>

Literalising these images of Majuba as a grave for British honour, a newspaper in the South

African colony of Natal reported that, on the occasion of the surrender in 1881, a British Union flag had been ‘solemnly buried’ with the word ‘Resurgam’ inscribed upon it.<sup>19</sup> Exhumed in 1899, the ‘emblem’ was ‘resurrected’ by the promise of a different ending to the story, and of vengeance for the British soldiers whose ‘blood cried for justice from a still reeking sod’.<sup>20</sup>

The call for vengeance resounds through the newspaper poems of the period. Ingram’s ‘Song of the Uitlander’ accused Britain of allowing ‘her brave sons to lie | In graves dishonoured and nameless’, claiming that ‘the earth has called out vainly | For the blood that is in its soil’.<sup>21</sup> An anonymous Natal poet invoked ‘heralds of glory’ to ‘arouse [...] The men of our nation’ to ‘Avenge those who sleep in unaveng’d graves’.<sup>22</sup> And a London music hall lyricist willingly anticipated the cost of that vengeance:

They wanted war—they have it—we’ll let them have their fill—  
But—we’ll let them have no second version of Majuba Hill. [...]

English—Scotch—Welsh—Irish—and Colonial Volunteers—  
Will write us with their blood a tale to tell through all the years.<sup>23</sup>

The sense that the earlier encounter had left unfinished business is most clearly articulated in Ingram’s image of living soldiers in South Africa in 1899 being joined by their predecessors:

Rise! silent brigade on Mount Prospect!  
Wake! dead on Majuba Height!  
[...]

Our comrades [sic] throughout the ages,  
Who fought and fell in vain,  
Shall rise on the day of battle,  
And parade in state again. [...]

The tramp of the armed battalions  
Has sent through the land a thrill;  
It has stirred the hearts of the living,  
And the dead on Majuba Hill.<sup>24</sup>

Ingram’s lines envisage the dead at Majuba as temporarily interred, place-markers for future

British victories, like the flag marked ‘Resurgam’. British blood, and the poet’s ink, are set to revise the history of Majuba; the soldiers of 1899 are called upon to rewrite ‘with their blood’ a new ‘tale to tell through all the years’ – a tale to replace that told by the dead of 1881.<sup>25</sup>

When ‘Majuba Day’ coincided with a British victory in February 1900, the celebrations of newspaper poets both confirmed and capitalized on the rhetorical power of Majuba. As a Natal newspaper editor wrote, ‘It was only to be expected that so fine a theme as the surrender of Cronje on Majuba Day would inspire the poets’.<sup>26</sup> In characteristically Kiplingesque cockney, the London *Daily Chronicle*’s poet alluded explicitly to the stain which Kipling’s Tommy Atkins was ‘wiping [...] off the state’:

And it’s—  
Ho, I sye,  
Step this why,  
Sutthink’s dropped art o’ the ormerneck as  
they thought was their ter styel  
It were chalked up pline, no dart,  
But Bobs ’as rubbed it art,  
An’ their ain’t no more, their ain’t no  
more, no more Majoober Dye!<sup>27</sup>

The slate, and the calendar, had been wiped clean; the ‘soiled’ flag, buried in dishonour, could be flown again; the bodies whose falling had marked defeat were symbolically resurrected by the inscription of victory on the date which had been stained with their blood. The postponed glory which their deaths appeared to promise was realized, and the example acted as a guarantee for the other bodies resting on or buried in the South African landscape. In the image of Majuba, 1881 could be overwritten; topographic sites could acquire new significance. The *Daily Chronicle* poet captures the demotic enthusiasm with which this prospect was greeted, slipping between dactylic and iambic lines in a conversational style that evokes the exuberant performances of Kipling’s ‘Absent-Minded Beggar’.

Majuba Hill is a paradigmatic example of Ian Baucom's 'memory-haunted locale', a '*lieu de memoire*' where an 'identity-preserving, identity-enchanting, and identity-transforming aura lingers'.<sup>28</sup> The South African hill was transformed – by newspaper poets, among others – into a 'site of memory' in which British imperial sovereignty was first threatened and then preserved. A similar process shaped representations of the South African War's siege towns of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith; tactically insignificant but emotionally freighted, these were depicted in British newspapers as dramatic re-runs of earlier imperial encounters: one poet described them as 'Worthy to rank with old Delhi, | And the towers of famed Lucknow', although their situations differed from those of the Indian cities in almost every respect.<sup>29</sup> Majuba Hill, like these towns, was what Kate McLoughlin calls 'allochthonous', assuming temporary, almost arbitrary, significance for the duration of a military encounter.<sup>30</sup> But once battle had moved on, these points did not lose their emotional valency. Instead, they retained the qualities of 'thickness' McLoughlin describes, transformed into memorial palimpsests.<sup>31</sup> The prospect of a fresh encounter between British and Boer at Majuba promised to inscribe the hill with a new narrative, 'blot[ting] for all time away | The memory, torturing and bitter, | Of the time when our flag was soiled', as Ingram put it.<sup>32</sup> But this overwriting could never fully succeed in occluding the original, obsessively-repeated story of defeat; the 'identity' which Majuba 'locate[d] and secure[d]' was a doubtful, anxious one.<sup>33</sup> While Baucom's *lieux de memoire* are supposed to 'house [...] the nation's past, and glorious, and true identity', Majuba operated as an ideal site of imperial memory precisely because its palimpsestic topography was inscribed by failure as well as victory: the 'glory' it promised was postponed; the hill stood for both the certainty of ultimate success and the humiliation of defeat.<sup>34</sup> Its image in the newspaper poems of 1899 reinforced even while it denied the anxious fears of an empire 'incessantly dreaming the nervous dream of its own demise'.<sup>35</sup>



Images of the bodies of the British dead at Majuba in the newspaper poems of the South African War thus offered a model for memorialisation that was simultaneously reassuring and disconcerting, establishing a pattern that was taken up by other poets contemplating the ultimate intimacy between British body and wartime landscape in 1899-1902. In newspaper poems which variously perform the functions of obituaries, elegies, eulogies and memorials, poems concerned with British bodies lying permanently in foreign soil asked what happens to those bodies, and what happens to the land, exposing the processes involved as uncanny. Mapping the landscape as a place of bewilderment and loss, poets articulated an anxious awareness of the threat posed to British bodies by South African topography, and figured death in South Africa as somehow especially grievous. These poems hint at fears that British bodies might be literally and metaphorically misplaced, that the graves of the British dead might prove unlocatable, that the 'barren' veld might refuse to give up the secret of where bodies were hidden, denying mourners the chance to pay the graves of the British dead the respect that proper commemoration requires. Meanwhile, some memorial poems attempted a compensatory mapping process, a cartography of remembering in which the South African terrain was imaginatively marked and changed by the presence of British bodies. These texts capitalized on the intimacy between the British dead and the South African landscape to advance optimistic imperial claims for ways in which the land itself might be vulnerable to the transformative presence of British bodies.

### III

The visual repertoire available to newspaper poets representing the relationship between soldier and land in 1899-1902 had recently changed. The red coats that had been synonymous with the British army for centuries, and which parts of the army were fighting

in as late as 1885, had been replaced. The khaki in which British forces arrived in South Africa was not only less splendid than scarlet, but it had potentially troubling symbolic significance. The idea that British soldiers should camouflage themselves rather than boldly proclaiming their presence required a reworking of notions of chivalry and honour, while khaki outfits also signalled a new relationship between British soldiers and the South African land. A strange anti-war poem called ‘The Worshippers’ narrates a dream in which ‘ancient Moses’ looks down over a scene ‘Whereon a mighty army fights | A foe that does not show his face’.<sup>36</sup> Moses asks,

And what are these that prostrate lie?  
And these that kneel, yet have not prayed? [...]

Can they be worshippers of earth  
That each and all her colours wear?<sup>37</sup>

The poem’s pacifist moral comes in its closing stanza:

One answered, ‘Ay, these worship Earth,  
And when they asked for gold she gave;  
And now since gold might not content,  
She gives them her last gift—a grave.’<sup>38</sup>

The soldiers’ deaths are the consequence of imperial greed; both death and cupidity are foreshadowed by their khaki clothes, which identify them as bound to and bound for the earth. Their Britishness is not mentioned; seeking ‘gold’, and finding ‘a grave’, these are ‘Worshippers’ of the South African terrain, their new uniforms marking their allegiance to the land on which they die, rather than to their home. Indeed, the poet’s critique may be inflected by a racial anxiety about the fragility of whiteness in this wartime scene. A comparable note of antipathy towards the ‘colours’ of ‘earth’ comes across in ‘The Khaki Corps’, a poem originally published in the *Natal Witness* and reprinted in the *Westminster Gazette*. As the title suggests, the British soldiers’ identities are defined by their uniforms, which become a point of obsession for the speaker.<sup>39</sup> The soldiers are ‘brown-clad’, wearing ‘dull khaki’ and undifferentiated from the surrounding ground, ‘As dust-brown as

the ant-heaps'; when the speaker calls this 'our modern chivalry', she or he appears unconvinced (10, 5-6). The moment of the soldiers' deaths is celebrated as the point at which they resign their khaki uniforms, making a grisly exchange, when 'through the brown encasing slow crept the bright red gore | As one by one our boys resigned for ever from the corps' (7-8). While khaki uniforms suggest an unsettling affinity between dead men and land, the blood of the soldiers' death-wounds returns them to the old spectacular glory for which the poem is nostalgic, and marks them out visually from a landscape which threatens to hide them forever.

Euphemisms traditionally attached to the wartime dead are so commonplace that they are almost invisible. In some newspaper poems, however, the physicality of the South African terrain serves to expose euphemisms as metaphor, for example by reasserting the distance between sleep and death. The dead soldiers of 'The Khaki Corps' lie 'Midst the kopjes, in the krantzies', 'sleeping in the trenches, where they fought and where they fell, | Where the eagle keeps his vigil, where the ox-bells toll their knell' (10-12). Ox-bells might be reassuringly familiar, but these poems repeatedly trip over reminders of wildness and difference – the presence of eagles, of kopjes and krantzies, of the unreadable wind. Comforting platitudes are undercut in these poems by a firm sense of subterranean physicality, as dead bodies are insistently emplaced within, on or under the South African land. 'A Border Lament' exhorts the dead soldier to 'Sleep, Borderer, sleep! Beneath the ground is peace' while 'The winds of hate are loud upon the veldt'.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, James Paton, a New Zealander who served in South Africa as a Colonial Volunteer, pictured the dead soldier 'sleeping his sleep alone', 'in the narrow veldland grave', as 'the veld winds o'er him blow' (36, 32, 37).<sup>41</sup> This positioning can bring speaker and reader up short, as in Ethel Clifford's 'The Relief of Ladysmith', published under the signature 'F. C.' in the *Westminster*

*Gazette*, in which the speaker addresses the subterranean dead as though they are still sentient, and nearby.<sup>42</sup> The poem's opening stanza takes up a familiarly euphemistic mode:

Brave heart, where you lie at rest,  
In the long-beleaguered town,  
Can you hear the night-wind lift the flag  
Where the southern stars look down?<sup>43</sup>

The physical presence of the dead body asserts itself, however, beginning with the appeal in the poem's third line to the interlocutor's posthumous sense of hearing. 'The earth' becomes something insistently above and around the dead, prompting the poet to wonder whether they are sensitive or insensitive to the ground's tremors:

Where you lie in your grave, brave heart,  
Can you hear the war-drums beat?  
Can you feel the pulse of the trampled earth  
Beneath victorious feet?<sup>44</sup>

Notwithstanding the repetition of the euphemistic 'brave heart', which reads as an increasingly hopeless impulse to resist picturing the body itself, Clifford's poem draws attention to the physical positioning of bodies under the 'trampled earth', unsettling the idea that victories give meaning to the ultimate sacrifice. 'The message' about the besieged town's rescue 'goes from the hill | And near and far is read' (13-14), but the repetition of 'can you hear?' (3, 10) reiterates the point that there is one place the news will not reach: 'The living know it overseas—but who shall tell the dead?' (16). Clifford's conclusion is ambiguous; the questions receive no answer; the dead do not speak to confirm or deny their awareness of the victory celebrations going on above their corpses.

Another poem which positions the dead or dying body firmly on the South African ground led the London *Daily Chronicle* to break their customary rule against publishing 'poems by writers unknown to us'.<sup>45</sup> Herbert Cadett's 'War' struck Thomas Hardy, too, who clipped it out of the newspaper to preserve in his notebook.<sup>46</sup>

Private Smith of the Royals; the veldt and a slate-black sky,

Hillocks of mud, brick-red with blood, and a prayer—half curse—to die.  
A lung and a Mauser bullet; pink froth and a half-choked cry.

Private Smith of the Royals; a torrent of freezing rain;  
A hail of frost on a life half lost; despair and a grinding pain.  
And the drip-drip-drip of the Heavens to wash out the brand of Cain.

Private Smith of the Royals, self-sounding his funeral knell;  
A burning throat that each gasping note scrapes raw like a broken shell.  
A thirst like a red-hot iron and a tongue like a patch of Hell.

Private Smith of the Royals; the blush of a dawning day;  
The fading mist that the sun had kissed—and over the hills away  
The blest Red Cross like an angel in the trail of the men who slay.

But Private Smith of the Royals gazed up at the soft blue sky—  
The rose-tinged morn like a babe new born and the sweet-songed birds on high—  
With a fleck of red on his pallid lip and a film of white on his eye.

Red, white and blue in the final stanza signify something more, or perhaps less, than the flag for which these soldiers die. The syntax refuses to offer the linearity that might confer meaningfulness or relief, as the setting and sensations of the soldier's death are listed with no finite verbs to give them temporal order. The reader is plunged into an extended present during which time appears to stand still, forced to watch alongside the figure sprawled among 'hillocks of mud', waiting and praying to die. Even the moment of wounding is brought into the eternal present of the dying: 'A lung and a Mauser bullet; pink froth and a half-choked cry'. When the main verb finally comes in the closing stanza, it is deceptive: 'Private Smith of the Royals gazed up' at a morning sky he cannot see. Though it occludes the actual moment of death, the poem eschews euphemism in its portrayal of the soldier's 'thirst like a red-hot iron and a tongue like a patch of hell', while this land of extremity subjects his wounded body to 'a torrent of freezing rain' and 'A hail of frost'. In line with Cadett's haptic focus, Private's Smith's dying is marked not by the idealized calm of knowing self-sacrifice, which might accompany the act of dying with a 'funeral knell' of meaningfulness, but by ugly and inarticulate noises. The poem's title implies that this soldier's death stands not just for all such deaths, but for the fact of

conflict itself. Through his generic name, rank and regiment, Private Smith of the Royals is an anonymous representative of thousands of ordinary British soldiers, a synecdoche for the whole army, his dying face reflecting the blue of the sky to make a strangely inverted Union flag. The poem rejects the glorifying clichés of sacrifice, honour or nobility; indeed, the extremity of his suffering is linked to divine judgement for a war between two Protestant Christian nations, as the ‘torrent of freezing rain’ is figured as ‘the drip-drip-drip of the Heavens to wash out the brand of Cain’. The soldier, and the nation he represents, is marked with the sign of the most ancient crime: the sin of killing a brother. On the other hand, he receives his wound under a sky that is ‘slate-black’, blankly refusing to signify the ordering or observation of fate or divinity. Dawn comes like a benediction, returning the innocence of ‘a babe new-born’ to the scarred landscape stained ‘brick-red with blood’. But the blessing is for the land, not the dead: the sun kisses ‘the fading mist’, not the ‘pallid lip’ of the soldier; the ‘rose-tinged morn’, ‘soft blue sky’ and ‘sweet-songed birds’ are not for him. The ‘dawning day’ seems to ‘blush’ at what the ‘fading mist’ reveals: the dead soldier’s gory face, described with no softening metaphors.

Cadett was a journalist and a writer of detective fiction, but his bleak vision was shared by poets with a closer experience of the realities of war. In ‘Christmas, 1899’, G. Murray Johnston, a captain in the British Army in South Africa, used the exposed and dying soldier’s body to articulate doubts about what the war meant for concepts of identity and Britishness.<sup>47</sup>

Something ’uddled ’gainst the sky  
    Some poor devil dead,  
And our squadron riding by  
    Cursed his gaping ’ead—  
Just a man and nothing more,  
    Smudged across with red.<sup>48</sup>

The dead man is anonymous, his figure scarcely human. The meaninglessness of the sight is expressed through the idea that he has been ‘Smudged across with red’, marked out for death, but carelessly, imprecisely. At the sight of his exposed corpse, his comrades ‘Wondered what they thought at ’ome’ (7), whether the dead man’s family might ask ‘where is Jack today?’ (10), but their reflections quickly turn back to their own situation:

Something ’uddled ’gainst the sun.  
What’s the odds or why?  
One poor devil’s work is done—  
Might be you or I—  
We wondered if it ’urt him much  
When ’e come to die.<sup>49</sup>

If the observing soldiers are callous, it is a callousness born out of a sense of their own interchangeability and insignificance. The body is seen only in silhouette ‘gainst the sky’, its identifying features – perhaps even its uniform – blanked out and unreadable. Britishness is implicated: this ‘poor devil’ is called Jack by the passing squadron, but the dead man could be Boer or Brit. In the failure to move from ‘Something’ to someone, and in the poem’s insistence that the corpse was ‘Just a man and nothing more’, the speaker pronounces that verdict over himself and his ‘squadron’ too, rejecting the narratives of honour or glory which could lend such a death meaning or beauty. The voice is blunt, even hostile, rejecting fluency and stubbornly refusing to be poetic. The trimeter lines of the traditional ballad form allow the monosyllabic rhyme words to resonate into silence; the six-line stanza, in which the rhyme occurs three times, resists the reader’s onward movement, obstructing the advance towards meaning. The position of the body ‘gainst the sun’ might seem to endow it with symbolic significance, and indeed Malvern Van Wyk Smith suggests that there is something Christlike about this figure in silhouette, especially in light of the poem’s title; but the repetition of ‘uddled’ asserts the awkward physicality of the corpse, placed heavily on the land, undercutting any redemptive metaphorical reading.<sup>50</sup> This exposed body

records death on the veld as bleak and careless; its unburied state is an index of the absence at the heart of a rhetoric of meaningfulness.

Edward Shee Evelyn takes up a similar position, using an intimate focus on the dying body in the South African landscape to expose the ‘Scene of horror’ represented by any ‘tale of war most glorious’.<sup>51</sup> The opening stanzas of ‘After the Battle’ appear at first to recall McLoughlin’s description of war writing ‘throw[ing] white paint at the red business’, as sanctifying moonlight cloaks the scene of battle’s aftermath:<sup>52</sup>

The gleam of moon so pale, so fitting,  
    Robes the battle-field in light;  
Those in garb of white befitting  
    Fallen in the fight.<sup>53</sup>

There is ‘sobbing’ in this scene (2), though it is not dying soldiers but rather the weeping ‘Of angels watching o’er those sleeping’ (3); the dead themselves are ‘calm and still’ (4). Indeed, introducing a ‘soldier lad’, ‘On whose still and upturned face | Lingers yet a smile in dying, | Scorning fear in every trace’ (9-13), it seems as though Evelyn is doing no more than recapitulating the old clichés and euphemisms. But the poem’s fourth stanza effects a dramatic shift:

There, ’neath bough of weeping willow,  
    Where the river gleams so bright,  
There I hear, midst scenes of sorrow,  
    Vultures shrieking through the night.<sup>54</sup>

The shrieking prompts an epiphany, a moment where the viewer comes to understand the brutal realities of a ‘conquering host victorious’, and the deceptions involved in rendering a ‘Scene of horror’ into the satisfying narrative of a ‘well-fought fight’ (27). The devastation might be ‘made lawful, | Sanctified by holy phrase’ (19-20), but the personal encounter with ‘this scene’ leads the poet to resolve ‘Ne’er again’ to ‘praise’ any ‘Future tale of war most glorious’ (21-23). ‘This blood-set page’ tells a truer ‘story’ (26). The hinge-point that turns ‘sorrow’ to ‘horror’ comes when classically English picturesque details – weeping



willows, gleaming river – are juxtaposed violently against the specific wildness of the South African land. As in Keppel Howard’s ‘The Lads in Blue’, another newspaper poem published in South Africa which pictures ‘vultures soaring’ above ‘the feast prepared anew’, vultures here represent a physical threat to the bodily integrity of the dead, as well as operating as a marker of difference, registering the foreignness of the terrain on which the ‘soldier lad is lying’ (9).<sup>55</sup> Evelyn’s poem offers two potential transformations, powerfully contrasted. Transfigured by the sanctifying beauty of moonlight, it is possible to read the soldier’s expression as one of calm self-control, ‘Scorning fear in every trace’ (12); the vultures, on the other hand, threaten to transform the dead in much less satisfyingly aesthetic ways, turning corpses into carrion. South Africa was imagined to be particularly inimical to the bodies of the British dead. Accordingly, when clergyman H. D. Rawnsley committed soldiers to ‘the last of the nurses—| The pitiful earth in whose peace we trust’ in a *Westminster Gazette* poem of February 1900, another poet was moved to counter in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a week later with an image of England ‘mourning the sons who, nourished at [her] breast’ have found ‘their abhorred rest | Where Briton never wished his grave to be’.<sup>56</sup> England, not South Africa, is the dead soldiers’ nurse. The nursing/nourishing image presents the identity of the British soldier as intimately and physically related to their home landscapes; the physical and psychological distance between the dead in South Africa and their place of true belonging compounds the horror of war deaths.

Positioning the South African landscape as somewhere that feels ‘lonely’ to the British visitor, poems which meditate on the dead in South Africa reinforce their lament for the distance between the war graves and the soldiers’ homes by cataloguing everything that the dead must lack or miss from England. For example, in another poem Rawnsley lists what the ‘Brave Borderer boy [...] Shall not see again’, from the ‘gay green squadrons of the Penrith larch’ to ‘the snowdrifts’ on Lake District mountains.<sup>57</sup> In ‘Private Bob of

Bolton', another clergyman-poet, E. Hewlett, uses a moment of comparison between the natural worlds of Britain and South Africa to heighten the pathos of a soldier's death, when 'Salford Jack' picks his own funeral flowers:<sup>58</sup>

Jack clomb th' hill beside me, an' he picks a yaller bloom,  
'Eh, Bob, 'tis like the primroses i'th' clough, thou knows, at whoam,'  
Then up he joomps, and gives a sob, and topples forrad dead,  
An' we're beawn' to run an' leave him, for the crags was just ahead.<sup>59</sup>

The 'yaller bloom' is only 'like' the familiar primrose of home. The poem repeatedly insists on the emplacement of Bob and his 'chums' in a very different landscape, 'By the sad Tugela River, | Sweeping down with sullen wave' (41-42). The poet's prepositions are significant: the speaker exhorts the reader to 'Leave [Bob] in his lonely grave', but it is a grave only in name; like his friends who also die in the poem, he is left behind, 'lyin' here and dyin' all alone' (8), within hearing of 'firin' on th' hill' (37) but without a nurse to bring a 'pillow' or 'a pannikin of water' (6-7), and with no hope of a timely burial. The yellow flowers seem momentarily reminiscent of primroses and the river seems 'sad', but the 'twinkling starlight' 'shiver[s]' and then fails: 'th' neet is varra chill [...] an' the stars are getting' dim' (38-39). This is not a landscape which can nurse or comfort the dying British men. Although Hewlett's poem is invested in the traditional narrative of war deaths as meaningful and honourable, it cannot swerve the uncomfortable fact of soldiers dying 'sorely wounded, all alone' (44) in a distant and resolutely foreign landscape, too far away to be consoled by loving friends at the point of death. In this poem, lonely dying prefigures a 'lonely grave'.

#### IV

The distance between South African graves and British mourners represented a threat to the rituals of commemoration by which war deaths are rendered meaningful or purposeful. A regular *Westminster Gazette* poet, dedicating a Shamrock 'to her Majesty Queen Victoria

on Saint Patrick's Day', brings together praise of 'our brave ones' who have 'fought for thee, bled for thee – *died!*' with a symbol which emphasizes the distance of their final resting place: 'Far are some graves from sweet Erin and never a Shamrock | Lies on them, wet with the tears of our love and our pride'.<sup>60</sup> The Shamrock represents the graveside obsequies which have to remain uncompleted because the bodies lie so far from those who would mourn them. Likewise, former soldier Smedley Norton described South Africa as 'that far-off Southern tomb', asking for honesty about 'the price of victory'.<sup>61</sup> There is a pre-echo of Wilfred Owen in his lament:

For those who strew our battlefields  
    No passing bell shall toll;  
Report the living and the dead,  
    Sergeant, call the roll!  
Show us the price of victory,  
    Just tell us what it's cost  
Say what the Motherland has gained  
    And also what she's lost.<sup>62</sup>

Having asserted that the dead 'will remain as sweet in mem'ry | As a morn in dewy May', the poet nonetheless questions how far such memories will satisfy those left behind, asking:

In the hush-tide of the gloaming,  
    Will there come, amidst the gloom,  
The shadows of our loved ones  
    From that far-off Southern tomb?<sup>63</sup>

The dead might 'strew' the battlefields, but as the solidity of their bodies fades, they are reduced to 'shadows'. South Africa itself seems to have become a general 'tomb' within which individual places of death are unmarked. Vividly recalling J. M. Coetzee's account of colonial terrain appearing to the colonist as a 'trackless' landscape refusing to 'emerge into meaningfulness' in order to be 'read', the question of 'what the Motherland has [...] lost' takes on literal, cartographical significance.<sup>64</sup> The editor of the London *Black and White Budget* in which 'Sergeant, Call the Roll!' was first published remarked that 'nothing has yet appeared so pregnant of real martial spirit or embodying so worthy a tribute to the memory of our troops' as this poem, reporting that the newspaper had received six hundred

requests for permission to recite it, indicating the number of 'literary societies' and 'concert-rooms' that had 'been stirred by the Author's impressive lines'.<sup>65</sup> But although Norton's poem insists on the power of memory and memorial to 'lift the darkness | From the shadowland of pain' (71-72), it also gestures towards anxieties on that count; can 'the Motherland' remember, or 'say [...] what she's lost'?

Thomas Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge' is perhaps the most famous poem of the South African War, and exemplifies these tropes perfectly. The child-soldier is too 'fresh' from 'his Wessex home' to be able to read the landscape himself: he cannot make any 'meaning' out of 'the broad Karoo, | The bush, the dusty loam'.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, although his body will 'Grow to some Southern tree' (15-16), his 'landmark' is an impersonal 'kopje-crest | That breaks the veldt around' (3-4). His loved ones will not be able to read the landscape, either, for any hint of his final resting place. He may 'forever be' a 'portion' of the place, but it remains an 'unknown plain', unknowable either to Hodge himself or to his family (13-14). The veldt will not give up the secret of his 'uncoffined' grave (2); his 'landmark' is an unreadable sign. Transformed by the alien landscape which receives him, and lost in the frighteningly featureless veldt, Hodge is watched over by the triply-strange 'foreign constellations', 'strange stars', 'strange-eyed constellations' (5,12, 17). In the implied contrast with Hodge's 'Wessex home', this poem captures the uncanniness of the experience which Homi Bhabha describes, of national identity caught between a glance backwards to 'the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth' and outwards to the '*unheimlich* terror of the space [...] of the Other'.<sup>67</sup> In identifying challenges to the processes of ritual memorialisation by which British bodies are supposed to be honoured, the newspaper poets of 1899-1902 position themselves as an alternative.

Like Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge', 'The Khaki Corps' pictures soldiers 'hidden 'neath the sod', unlocatable within the country 'on which they fought'.<sup>68</sup> The anonymous poet makes the point explicitly: the dead of this war are not to be found 'beneath masoleums' [sic] or 'under marble monuments where angel figures pray' (1-2). The poem attempts to minimize the significance of this, insisting that:

not the grandest sculpture in cathedrals old and grey  
Can enhance the earthly glory of our lads of yesterday.<sup>69</sup>

But the image of the dead, scattered 'here and there' (3) across vast tracts of space 'from Tugela to the Orange, right across the western plain' (9), like Norton's picture of soldiers who 'strew our battlefields', asserts itself too forcefully to be denied. While insisting that there is no need for monuments to the dead, this poem simultaneously offers itself as just such a monument, undercutting its own claim and betraying the anxiety which pulses through this poetry. An equivalent claim, similarly undermined, appears in A. D. Godley's description of the 'Souls of our best! Whose bodies fill | Their unforgotten grave'; the uncomfortable image of multiple 'bodies' within a single 'grave' registers a flicker of doubt over the assertion, while the fact that it is the grave which is 'unforgotten', rather than the dead soldiers, points to anxiety on precisely that point.<sup>70</sup> A poem addressed to current students by a former head-teacher at the prestigious Charterhouse School sounds a comparably involuntary note of uncertainty, holding up as an example the 'over 100 Charterhouse "boys" at the front as officers'.<sup>71</sup> These 'old boys', in William Haig-Brown's lines, are

Those whom duty called to die  
In the front ranks of Britain's chivalry;  
Tho' in the barren veldt their bodies claim  
Only a soldier's grave, their deathless fame  
Lives in our hearts.<sup>72</sup>

'*Only a soldier's grave*' implies that the final resting-places of the dead in South Africa, however undesirable, are as all soldiers' graves. But the 'barren veldt' acknowledges that

there is something particularly discomfiting about South Africa. The familiar images of the South African terrain as 'bare' and 'barren' take on, here, a further significance. Tacitly reinforcing an imperial claim over supposedly empty and available land, as well as registering the hostility of the landscape, they also perform the poets' anxieties about the dreadful possibility of British graves being lost. As an anonymous *Pall Mall Gazette* poet put it in March 1900, the soldiers who died in South Africa exchanged 'this dear land' and 'sweet home faces' for 'a grave | A lonely grave, 'midst immemorial sand, | Or parching deserts of the vast Karoo'.<sup>73</sup> Unlike the personified earth of England, this ground is insensible, 'parched' of sentience. The sand is oblivious or indifferent to the English bodies; it can't, or won't, remember that they are there. But its 'vast' aspect represents another threat, implying that this quality of the landscape might prevent other people remembering, too. The unreadability of a 'barren' terrain is menacing because, as in the images of the dead scattered 'here and there' in 'The Khaki Corps', and Norton's battlefields 'strew[n]' with bodies, it suggests that the locations of the war dead might be finally unknowable. The juxtaposition in Haig-Brown's poem between this acknowledgement and the insistence that the memory of these soldiers nonetheless (or therefore) 'lives in our hearts' (18) comes to seem anxiously compulsive, when read alongside many other similar moments in poems published contemporaneously.

'By the Graves on the Veldt', one such poem by another school teacher, appeared in the London *Daily News* a week after Haig-Brown's in February 1900.<sup>74</sup> In it, Anglo-Irish poet James Rhoades counsels his readers to 'spare [the soldier dead] your pity' (1) and insists that these fallen heroes do not require the acts of commemoration which an identifiable grave makes possible:

No need of cross upon the breast,  
Or laurel to renown the brow.

Though the bare veldt around them spread,  
Not all un-noted of the skies,  
There springs above each hero-head  
The snow-white flower of Sacrifice.<sup>75</sup>

The 'graves' in this poem are no graves at all, but undifferentiated spots in a 'bare veldt'. The awkward litotes of 'not all un-noted of the skies' signals dissatisfaction even as it introduces the fanciful claim that an admiring natural world will provide the 'honours' the dead require (9), in place of the reverent grave-markers that would signal 'earthly fame' (10). Once again, the poem is marked by the internal incoherence of simultaneous avowals and disavowals of what the dead need or deserve. In filling in an imaginative map of South Africa with graves, these newspaper poets move from a cartography of loss characterized by anxiety about the ways that South Africa might threaten British bodies, to a different kind of mapping which makes South Africa British, recuperating the terrain imaginatively even while the war over it is in progress, and thus rescuing the bodies from their foreign resting-places. Although this memorialising remains incomplete or fraught with logical dissonances, these poems nonetheless present an attempt to move from obsessing over the perilous intimacy of dead British bodies and South African terrain to reflect on the potential for this to become a transformative, redemptive intimacy.

Edgar Wallace's poem 'A Casualty', published in Britain and South Africa, exemplifies this redemptive mapping.<sup>76</sup>

The sculor'd stone, the graven praise,  
The tablet in the chancel dim:  
The churchyard by familiar ways  
Are not for him.

A kind hand turns a stranger sod,  
And comrades bear him to his rest,  
Far from the homeland paths he trod,  
And loved the best.

Whate'er the duty may have been  
His humble task is dignified;

He served his country and his Queen,  
And serving—died.

The simple dignity of Wallace's tribute to the South African dead is tonally very far from the propagandistic encomiums of Rhoades and Haig-Brown, though it relies on similar rhetorical tropes. Wallace's more measured tone derives in part from the regularly end-stopped structure and metre of the poem, while the shorter fourth lines of each stanza enforce longer pauses. The caesura in the poem's final line requires two such pauses at the poem's conclusion. 'A Casualty' is gravestone-tablet shaped, while its regular walking-pace tetrameter suggests a reflective wander around a 'churchyard' of 'sculptor'd stone[s]', so that the dead commemorated are after all imaginatively transported to the graveyard that the poem tries to suggest they do not need. The poem also sustains an equivocal relationship to the anonymity of 'a casualty'; the dead man is treated with gentleness and honour, as though the poem wants to rescue him from the undifferentiated mass of wartime death statistics, but he remains nameless and unidentifiable; even the 'hand' which buries him is unknown. 'Not for him' implies a simple, perhaps fatalistic, propriety or justice about the lack of ceremony, while the pain of distance from 'the homeland paths he [...] loved the best' is assuaged by the complex image of 'A kind hand turn[ing] a stranger sod' as 'comrades bear him to his rest'. The poem imagines a literal truth, as the 'sod' is removed to make a grave, overlaid with an equivocal sense of transfiguration, as though the kindness of the grave-maker transforms the earth into something less foreign and 'strange', so that the act of burial is a moment in which the South African earth literally 'turns' into something more 'kind'. This suggestive detail in Wallace's poem provides a bridge from the anxious insistence on 'unforgotten' soldiers' graves to another set of images. If the land threatens to swallow and transform the soldiers who die on and are buried in it, other newspaper poems claim that the soldiers' bodies also possess the ability to transform the land around them. Corporal P. Jefferson McKenna describes 'tombs where their bones



have commingled with clay' in a poem published in the *Cape Town Weekly*, suggesting that the dead do more than lie in the South African land; they become a part of it, and it of them, in a process which has the capacity to change both.<sup>77</sup> The 'barrenness' of the land portrayed in many of the poems discussed here is imaginatively enriched by the presence of bodies, in an early premonition of Rupert Brooke's famous image. The imaginative effort by which these newspaper poets achieve their memorialisation of the dead (while, in some cases, paradoxically arguing that their own commemorative role is scarcely necessary), is by making British bodies capable of physically and morally transforming the South African landscape, rendering it imaginatively British.

## V

Like 'The Khaki Corps', 'The Cry of the Women' describes British soldiers willing to 'dye the veld in their lifeblood | And think it worth the cost'.<sup>78</sup> The British soldier's blood is the price paid to mark the land, in a Christ-like sacrifice of anointing and redemption. Of course, this line of thought raises inevitable logical problems, applying as it could to all combatants. Indeed, the *Daily Chronicle* tacitly acknowledged this fact the week before war was declared, printing what purports to be a translation, sent in by a correspondent, of a 'war-song which was sung by the Boers' during the 1881 conflict:

Our fathers' sweat, our fathers' blood  
Have soaked the ground on which they stood;  
Our mothers' tears, our mothers' toil  
Have hallowed this our Afric soil.

This is our land! This is our land!  
Reclaimèd by our fathers' hand;  
Reclaimèd once, we claim it now  
As made a garden by our plough.<sup>79</sup>

The colonial labour which transforms wildness into agricultural productivity is presented as grounds for possession. The logic denies the existence of indigenous peoples and sees

productivity only in terms of European industry, but also establishes an awkward precedent whereby later colonial arrivals could claim possession on the grounds of their contribution to greater efficiency or more modern productivity, as indeed the British did, citing the role played by British ‘uitlanders’ in developing Johannesburg into a booming industrial town as an argument for British sovereignty in the region. But the imaginatively powerful image of blood, sweat and tears transcends the legal and logical problems of ‘claim[ing]’ the land as the rightful outcome of having worked it. These emissions work in more subtle ways to ‘hallow’ the soil, making it sacred and setting it apart for the people whose bodily fluids have anointed it.

In ‘Imperial Light Horse’, a poet signing themselves Q in the *Natal Witness* took this image further.<sup>80</sup> The British dead, ‘Stiff and stark on the bare hill side’ provoke ‘Visions [...] Of nations still to come’ (3-8). Dead bodies are transfigured in these visions, and in turn transform the South African landscape:

Visions of cities, fair and grand,  
Scattered o’er the Afric plain—  
Here lie the heroes of the Rand  
Fighting for Freedom—slain.<sup>81</sup>

Q’s poem elaborates the trope of a passive and vacant Africa available for British possession, inviting readers to imagine a city springing up from each point on the veld where a British soldier lies, bringing urban metropolitan order to ‘empty’ African spaces and asserting military presence and might. Meanwhile, in line with Baucom’s idea that the empire’s spaces lay imaginatively ‘inside’ the conceptual ‘boundaries of Britishness’, the imaginative transformation allows the poet to rescue the dead from their South African graves by demonstrating that their deaths make the land British:<sup>82</sup>

Here let them rest on the bleak hillside,  
Finished all earthly toil;  
Comrades are saying with British pride:  
‘Resting on English soil.’<sup>83</sup>

‘Sons of the Jack’, which appeared in the *Cape Town Weekly*, develops the idea that British soldiers transformed the land on which they died in a more complex metaphor.<sup>84</sup> The poem was published in the middle of ‘black week’, in which the British army suffered three defeats in quick succession. In response to the catastrophic opening of the war, which had already seen the British defeated on Talana Hill at Glencoe, at the battle of Modder River, and at Graspan, the poem enumerates the locations of these disasters, portraying them as places where British bodies mark, and mark out, the landscape.

Tears for the dead—the gallant dead—  
For soldiers’ souls in flight;  
Heroic Symons is laid to rest  
By Talana’s bloody height.  
The Cannon Kopje counts its dead,  
They fall by the Modder’s span,  
And Graspan’s plain is hallowed by  
The blood of the midshipman.<sup>85</sup>

The attempt to focus on ‘soldiers’ souls in flight’ seems immediately undermined by the physical groundedness of the list of body-strewn battlefields, as the dead are emplaced in specific locales. The South African landscape itself is portrayed as the combatant; the description of Talana as ‘bloody’ seems to go beyond the merely literal when juxtaposed with the possessive ‘Cannon Kopje count[ing] its dead’. But if the land seems hungry for British dead, the dead effect their own transformation, in a phrase exactly reminiscent of the Boer soldier song: ‘Graspan’s plain is hallowed’ by ‘the blood’ of the (British) men who die upon it. Moreover, the poet uses the metaphor of the ‘Union Jack’ (9) to represent British deaths as tactically, imperially significant, even when they come as part of devastating military defeats. In contrast with the use of red, white and blue in Cadett’s ‘War’, in this poem’s refrain the colours of the Union Flag symbolize the different branches of the military, with reference to the traditional fabrics of their uniforms as well as the qualities exhibited by these soldiers and sailors:

White stripe on the flag—unsullied is their honour,

Blue wedge on the flag—their courage is as true;  
Red stripe on the flag—their blood for Queen and country,  
Such are the sons of the Red, White and Blue.<sup>86</sup>

This straightforward symbolism gives a sense of propriety to the use of ‘the grand old Flag’ to ‘cover [the] forms’ of the dead: ‘They were sons of the Jack,—of the Union Jack’ (49, 51). But this flag is metaphorical, too. The poem opens by picturing ‘The Sea-Queen’s banner above her Throne’, ‘straining’ in the strength of ‘The voice of the great North Wind’ who ‘shouts with a mighty blast’ (1-4):

‘Send forth thy sons, O Flag of Truth,  
To pour out their blood again?  
From the fringe of the Jack—the Union Jack—  
The shreds were whirled apace.’<sup>87</sup>

The soldiers become ‘shreds’ ‘whirled [...] to the south’:

And some were dropped on the burnt Soudan,  
And some by lone Mafeking.  
By Belmont’s kopjes, boulder-strewn,  
In the streets of the Diamond Town,  
By Talana’s height and Tugela’s stream,  
They gathered and fluttered down.  
Strong threads from the fringe of the mighty flag,  
They settled by veld and flood,  
Brave sons of the Jack—of the Union Jack—  
The pride of the British blood.<sup>88</sup>

The apparent randomness of British dead strewn or scattered ‘here and there’ across the vast South African land, a source of anxiety in poems discussed above, is reframed. The distribution of English bodies is deliberate; they are both motivated and transported by ‘the great North Wind’ (3), with precise colonial intent. Death is euphemistically softened as these ‘shreds’ of the Union Flag ‘flutter’ gently down onto the hard facts of the South African land, the ‘kopjes’ and ‘boulders’, mountains and rivers. Once again, the poet makes no mention of people: this imaginary landscape is almost lunar in its emptiness – a burnt, lonely and boulder-strewn plain. Against these imposing natural forms, the ‘threads from the fringe of the mighty flag’ might seem anything but ‘strong’, but here they have the power to transform the land; as the scraps of fabric ‘settle’, they operate in the same way as

the settler colonists' labour in the Boer soldier-song, staking an imperial claim. Published at a moment of British military weakness, 'Sons of the Jack' makes an audacious claim. By transforming dead soldiers into the physical embodiment of British imperial power represented by the flag, their deaths turn the land into 'English soil', representing victory even when they are literally the index of the scale of defeat. The consoling power of such a claim must have been appealing indeed to poets and readers in December 1899, shocked and frightened by the disasters of 'black week', however dubious the oxymoronic image of 'strong threads'.

## V

In meditating on the British dead in South Africa, the newspaper poems of 1899-1902 fulfilled a range of roles. As elegy and eulogy, they made space for newspaper readers to share in a ritual of commemoration, honouring the dead by elaborating on the lives and deaths of the individuals named in casualty lists or alluded to in the matter-of-fact prose of news reports. The process of humanising the war dead could be put to diverse political uses, from advancing a pacifist or pro-Boer argument to exhorting readers to lend their ongoing support to the government at a time of national and imperial crisis for the sake of the soldiers paying the ultimate price. Newspaper poets could offer consolation that this price was worth paying, presenting readers with a familiar repertoire of euphemistic rhetoric and imagery to help process messy wartime deaths as necessary, valuable or even beautiful. At each turn, however, the South African landscape seemed to assert itself, undercutting bardic celebrations or priestly consecrations with unsettling reminders of the hostility or vastness of the South African terrain. While images of emptiness focused anxieties about the processes of memorialisation, a compensatory cartography of remembrance sees newspaper poets insisting on the idea that a soldier's grave 'gleams like a beacon', in W. H. Walker's words, transforming the locations of dead bodies into *lieux de*

*memoire*: 'the places in which England can locate and secure its identity'.<sup>89</sup> Like the dead at Majuba, British soldiers killed in battles which ended in defeat for the British could be redeemed by images of them as 'terrestrial' [sic] saints, as Walker put it, earth-bound for now but awaiting 'seraphs on the battlements celestial' to 'wake' them 'from out their tomb' (29-32). Place-markers for future victory, they render the land imaginatively British in anticipation, while memorial newspaper poems supply the architecture of remembrance which the vast South African landscape appears to deny. The major imaginative effort by which they achieve this memorialisation and, paradoxically, argue that their own commemorative role is unnecessary, is by making British bodies capable of transforming the South African land itself, rendering it imaginatively British. Perhaps the clearest expression of this comes in the most famous answer-poem to Hardy's 'Drummer Hodge', written by Rupert Brooke just fifteen years later. 'If I should die, think only this of me', Brooke pleads: 'That there's some corner of a foreign field | That is for ever England'.<sup>90</sup> Brooke's image of 'a richer dust concealed' in the earth over which British blood has been shed and in which British bodies are buried has multiple antecedents in the newspaper poems of 1899-1902. The poets presented here take up an intimate focus on individual deaths, building from them a cumulative cartography of remembering, in which an intense consciousness of buried British bodies and shed British blood transforms topographic locations from points on a chart of South Africa to beacons in a cultural memory map. The tactic could be used to powerful propagandistic effect, but its very repetition comes to feel overwrought. Meanwhile, reminders of the dead from 1881 at Majuba that link 'unaveng'd', 'dishonoured and nameless' graves to 'our honour's shallow grave' attest to the insecurities about British imperial ambition and military capability which characterized the whole literary colonial project.<sup>91</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'The Absent-Minded Beggar', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 October 1899, 2 (line 7).
- <sup>2</sup> Bill Nasson, *The Boer War: The Struggle for South Africa* (Stroud, 2010), 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Fransjohan Pretorius, *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War* (Plymouth, 2010), 9.
- <sup>4</sup> e.g. Elleke Boehmer, 'Perspectives on the South African War', in D. Attwell and D. Attridge (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Cambridge, 2012), 246-61 (249); Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds* (London, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> Alison Chapman and Caley Ehnes, 'Introduction to the Special Issue on Periodical Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 52 (2014), 1-20 (4).
- <sup>6</sup> J. F., 'One Church for One Place', *Daily News*, 9 December 1899, 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Linda K. Hughes, 'What the *Wellesley Index* Left Out: Why Poetry Matters to Periodical Studies', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 40 (2007), 91-125 (91).
- <sup>8</sup> Malvern Van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Menlo Park, 1999), 42. Boehmer, 'Perspectives', 251.
- <sup>9</sup> Laura Chrisman, 'The Imperial Romance', in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, 226-45.
- <sup>10</sup> Boehmer, 'Perspectives on the South African War', 251.
- <sup>11</sup> Kirstie Blair, 'The Newspaper Press and the Victorian Working Class Poet', in John Goodridge (ed.), *A History of British Working Class Literature* (Cambridge, 2017), 264-80 (277).
- <sup>12</sup> Cape Town Library of Parliament (CTLP), Mendelssohn Collection, Pera Muriel Button, *The South African War: Newspaper Cuttings*, 6 vols.
- <sup>13</sup> Paula M. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge, 1999), 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, 'Colonialism, racism and representation', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, 2006), 109-12 (109-10) (emphases original).
- <sup>15</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, 2015), 5-6.
- <sup>16</sup> J. F. Ingram, 'The Song of the Uitlander', *Otago Witness*, New Zealand, 22 February 1900, 61 (lines 60-62), in CTLP Button, i, 44.
- <sup>17</sup> Harold Begbie, 'Majuba Day', reprinted from the *London Globe* in *Montgomery County Times*, 3 March 1900, 3, and in a Natal newspaper, appearing in CTLP Button, iii, 236. Collected in Harold Begbie, *The Handy Man and Other Verses* (London, 1900), 64-66.

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- <sup>18</sup> Begbie, 'Majuba Day', lines 9-12.
- <sup>19</sup> 'The Lesson of a Flag', CTLP Button, iii, 170.
- <sup>20</sup> 'The Lesson of a Flag'.
- <sup>21</sup> Ingram, 'Song', lines 50-51, 47-48.
- <sup>22</sup> Anon., 'The Avengers', CTLP Button, i, 79 (lines 37-40).
- <sup>23</sup> J. E. MacManus, 'Leo Stormont's Song: Sons of our Empire' (London, 1900), lines 47-52. London, British Library, Pamphlets on the Boer War, Cup 21 ff 1 16.
- <sup>24</sup> Ingram, 'Song', lines 35-6, 41-4, 65-8.
- <sup>25</sup> MacManus, 'Leo Stormont's Song', line 52.
- <sup>26</sup> CTLP Button, iii, 236.
- <sup>27</sup> Anon., 'Majuba Day', *Daily Chronicle*, 3 March 1900, 4 (lines 5-11, 27-33); reprinted in the *Gloucestershire Echo*, 3 March 1900, 4; *South Wales Daily News*, 5 March 1900, 6 and, under the heading 'Wiped Out', the *Cardiff Times*, 10 March 1900, 6.
- <sup>28</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, 1999), 19.
- <sup>29</sup> W. H. Walker, 'Ballad of the Siege of Ladysmith', CTLP Button, iii, 37.
- <sup>30</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge, 2011), 91.
- <sup>31</sup> McLoughlin, *Authoring War*, 91.
- <sup>32</sup> Ingram, 'Song', lines 60-2.
- <sup>33</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 19.
- <sup>34</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 35.
- <sup>35</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 93-4.
- <sup>36</sup> E. C. 'The Worshippers', *Westminster Gazette*, 21 April 1900, 2 (lines 1-4).
- <sup>37</sup> E. C., 'Worshippers', lines 15-16, 19-20.
- <sup>38</sup> E. C., 'Worshippers', lines 21-4.
- <sup>39</sup> Anon., 'The Khaki Corps', CTLP Button, iii, 226, originally published in the *Natal Witness*. Extracts were published in the *Westminster Gazette*, 18 April 1900, 8 and the *Cork Examiner*, 20 April 1900, 4.
- <sup>40</sup> H. D. Rawnsley, 'A Border Lament', *Westminster Gazette*, 10 May 1900, 2 (lines 1, 13-14); reprinted in the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 12 May 1900, 4; *Penrith Observer*, 11 June 1901, 6. Collected in H. D. Rawnsley, *Ballads of the War* (London, 1901), 188-90.
- <sup>41</sup> James Paton, 'Father and Son', CTLP Button, iii, 103 (lines 36, 32, 37).



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- <sup>42</sup> F. C. [Ethel Clifford], 'The Relief of Ladysmith', *Westminster Gazette*, 2 March 1900, 2. Collected in Ethel Clifford, *Songs of Dreams* (London, 1903), 60.
- <sup>43</sup> Clifford, 'Relief of Ladysmith', lines 1-4.
- <sup>44</sup> Clifford, 'Relief of Ladysmith', lines 9-13.
- <sup>45</sup> Herbert Cadett, 'War', *Daily Chronicle*, 26 October 1899, 6. Reprinted in the *South Wales Echo*, 28 October 1899, 3; *South Wales Daily News*, 30 October 1899, 6; *Cheltenham Examiner*, 1 November 1899, 2; *Arbroath Herald*, 2 November 1899, 3.
- <sup>46</sup> *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Lennart A. Björk (London, 1985), 84-5; the poem was also reprinted in America: *Journal-Tribune* [Gadsden, Alabama], 4 January 1900, 3.
- <sup>47</sup> G. Murray Johnston, 'Christmas, 1899', in *A Century of South African Poetry*, ed. by Michael Chapman (Craighall, 1981), 81.
- <sup>48</sup> Murray Johnston, 'Christmas, 1899', lines 1-6.
- <sup>49</sup> Murray Johnston, 'Christmas, 1899', lines 13-18.
- <sup>50</sup> Malvern Van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902)*, 2nd edn (Menlo Park, 1999), 115.
- <sup>51</sup> E. Shee Evelyn, 'After the Battle', CTLP Button, i. 116.
- <sup>52</sup> McLoughlin, *Authoring War*, 147.
- <sup>53</sup> Evelyn, 'After the Battle', lines 5-8.
- <sup>54</sup> Evelyn, 'After the Battle', lines 13-16.
- <sup>55</sup> Keppel Howard, 'The Lads in Blue', *Cape Town Weekly*, 3 January 1900, 18 (line 53).
- <sup>56</sup> H. D. Rawnsley, 'A Graveside Memory at Ladysmith', *Westminster Gazette*, 21 February 1900, 2 (lines 15-16), reprinted in the *Southend Standard*, 22 February 1900, 5; *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), 21 March 1900, 6; *Oxfordshire Weekly News*, 21 March 1900, 2; *St. Austell Star*, 29 March 1900, 3. Collected in Rawnsley, *Ballads*, 97-98. 'Anciently thrill'd and saturate with life', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 February 1900, 2 (lines 13-16).
- <sup>57</sup> Rawnsley, 'Border Lament' (lines 1, 2, 5-6).
- <sup>58</sup> E. Hewlett, 'Private Bob of Bolton', *Manchester Courier*, 14 February 1900, 6; *North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 15 February 1900, 4; *Manchester Times*, 16 February 1900, 5; *Manchester Courier*, 17 February 1900, 15; *Star* (Guernsey), 6 March 1900, 1. Issued as a pamphlet (Manchester, 1900), London, British Library, Pamphlets on the Boer War, Cup 21 ff 1 16.
- <sup>59</sup> Hewlett, 'Private Bob', lines 21-4.

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- <sup>60</sup> L. A. C., 'To Her Majesty Queen Victoria on St Patrick's Day', *Westminster Gazette*, 17 March 1900, 2 (lines 9-12, emphasis original).
- <sup>61</sup> Smedley Norton, 'Sergeant, Call the Roll!' *Society*, 25 November 1899, reprinted in *South Wales Daily News*, 24 November 1899, 6; *Henley Advertiser*, 2 December 1899, 8; *Devon Valley Tribune*, 5 December 1899, 14; *Black and White Budget*, 13 January 1900, 32. Collected in Smedley Norton, *Bramcote Ballads, with a Brief Diary of the Late Conflict in South Africa* (London, 1906).
- <sup>62</sup> Norton, 'Sergeant', lines 1-8.
- <sup>63</sup> Norton, 'Sergeant', lines 49-52.
- <sup>64</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, 1988), 9.
- <sup>65</sup> Quoted in Norton, *Bramcote Ballads*, iii.
- <sup>66</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Drummer Hodge', *Literature*, 28 November 1899. In Thomas Hardy, *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Oxford, 1994), 14-15 (lines 8-10).
- <sup>67</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990), 2.
- <sup>68</sup> Anon., 'Khaki Corps', lines 3-4.
- <sup>69</sup> Anon., 'Khaki Corps', lines 13-14.
- <sup>70</sup> A. D. Godley, 'England at War', *Spectator*, 84 (6 January 1900), 18 (lines 25-6); reprinted in *Gloucester Journal*, 13 January 1900, 5; *New York Times*, 28 January 1900, 27 and *Mafeking Mail*, 4 April 1900, 2, and quoted by a correspondent to the *Inverness Courier*, 21 December 1900, 3.
- <sup>71</sup> William Haig-Brown, 'Charterhouse Boys at the Front', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1 February 1900, 8, reprinted in *Portsmouth Evening News*, 2 February 1900, 2 and *Sporting Life*, 14 February 1900, 7.
- <sup>72</sup> Haig-Brown, 'Charterhouse Boys', lines 14-18.
- <sup>73</sup> Anon., 'English Dead in South Africa', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 28 March 1900, 2 (lines 11-14).
- <sup>74</sup> James Rhoades, 'By the Graves on the Veldt', *Daily News*, 9 February 1900, 4, reprinted in the *Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 February 1900, 3; *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 16 February 1900, 3; *St. Andrews Citizen*, 17 February 1900, 3.
- <sup>75</sup> Rhoades, 'By the Graves', lines 11-16.
- <sup>76</sup> Edgar Wallace, 'A Casualty', *Cornish Telegraph*, 14 February 1900, 3; *Dundee Evening Post*, 8 March 1900, 2; *Blyth News*, 20 March 1900, 4; *Shields Daily Gazette*, 21 March 1900, 4; *War Pictures*, 1 (21 April 1900), 324. The poem was also reprinted in a Natal newspaper and appears in CTLP Button, iii, 43.
- <sup>77</sup> P. Jefferson McKenna, 'The Warrior Dead', *Cape Town Weekly*, 17 January 1900, 8.
- <sup>78</sup> W. A. R., 'The Cry of the Women', CTLP Button, iii, 9 (lines 17-18).

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- <sup>79</sup> 'Leave us alone!', *Evening Standard*, 8 March 1881, 5, widely reprinted in 1881; in 1899, it appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*, 7 October 1899, 5; *Clarion*, 14 October 1899, 5; *Orkney Herald*, 18 October 1899, 7; *Tower Hamlets Independent*, 28 October 1899, 3; *Derry Journal*, 17 November 1899, 6; *Shetland Times*, 17 March 1900, 7 (lines 5-12).
- <sup>80</sup> Q, 'Imperial Light Horse', CTLP Button, iii, 18, reprinted from the *Natal Witness*.
- <sup>81</sup> Q, 'Imperial Light Horse', lines 9-12.
- <sup>82</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 10.
- <sup>83</sup> Q, 'Imperial Light Horse', lines 21-4.
- <sup>84</sup> E. A. T., 'Sons of the Jack', *Cape Town Weekly*, 13 December 1899, 25.
- <sup>85</sup> E. A. T., 'Sons', lines 41-8.
- <sup>86</sup> E. A. T., 'Sons', lines 13-16.
- <sup>87</sup> E. A. T., 'Sons', lines 7-10.
- <sup>88</sup> E. A. T., 'Sons', lines 17-28.
- <sup>89</sup> W. H. Walker, 'The Last Post at Frere: December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1899', CTLP Button, i, 87 (line 18); Baucom, *Out of Place*, 19.
- <sup>90</sup> Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier', *Poetry*, VI (1), April 1915.
- <sup>91</sup> Ingram, 'Song' (line 51); Anon., 'The Avengers' (line 40); Begbie, 'Majuba Day' (line 11).