

## **The ‘Five Shilling Rebellion’: Rural White Male Anxiety and the 1914 Boer Rebellion \***

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In October 1914 the most talked of incident in the *platteland dorps* (rural villages) was not the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the clouds of war gathering over Europe,<sup>1</sup> but the fine imposed on General Christiaan de Wet, hero of the South African War (1899–1902), for beating a black child. What had people in the bars, in the *handelshuise* (trading stores) and on the *stoeps* talking was not the veracity of the charge – indeed, De Wet had conceded its truth – but the manner in which the agent of the state had treated the child. De Wet pleaded guilty to what he perceived to be a technical offence, and noted that:

The king had allowed a magistrate to be placed over him who was an absolute tyrant, he has made it impossible for us to tolerate the Government any longer. I was charged before him for beating a native boy. I only did it with a small shepherd’s whip, and for that I was fined five shillings.<sup>2</sup>

The *platteland* was alive with rumours about the case and its consequences. A couple of years before, De Wet had disposed of his land in the northern Orange Free State and was in semi-retirement, farming in Memel on the Natal border. The charge had hauled him back into the public realm. On 28 October 1914, De Wet hastily set about raising a commando composed of 150 local followers. Amid rumours of open rebellion, they clattered into the north-eastern Orange Free State

\*. This article has been drawn from S. Swart, ‘The Rebels of 1914: Masculinity, Republicanism and the Social Forces that Shaped the Boer Rebellion’ (MA thesis, University of Natal, 1997). I wish to extend my warm thanks, in particular, to Robert Morrell, and also to Catherine Burns, Anton Ehlers, Albert Grundlingh, Adrian Ryan, Stanley Trapido and to the reviewers of the *South African Historical Journal*.

1. Deneys Reitz testifies to this fact: D. Reitz, *Trekking On* (London, 1933), 66.  
2. TAD (hereafter Transvaal Archives Depot), SC 1–15, *Report of the Select Committee, On Rebellion*, Union of South Africa House of Assembly. See also E. Rosenthal, *General de Wet* (Cape Town, n.d. [no date]), 139. The magistrate, Colin Fraser, happened to be the brother-in-law of ex-President Steyn.

town of Vrede. The magistrate, Colin Fraser, was surrounded and De Wet summoned the court's shorthand writer and demanded that his words be recorded. The old general announced with aggrieved outrage that the magistrate made it 'impossible for us to tolerate the government any longer', because after declaring a fine of five shillings, the latter had 'instead of reprimanding the boy and ordering him in the future to be obedient and to do his duty ... looked at the native as if he would like to give him a kiss'.<sup>3</sup>

His words resonated with the crowd, when he gave it as a reason for the rebellion he was fomenting, ostensibly against the government's decision to invade German South West Africa on Britain's behalf. The story was repeatedly cited in dissident speeches on the eve of the 1914 Rebellion. Furthermore, it was used metonymically after the Rebellion by witnesses, who referred to De Wet's case in their testimonies as a symbol of their own apprehension about a new kind of Black Peril. The Rebellion was dubbed the 'Five Shillings Rebellion', purportedly by Smuts himself, and the name gained popular currency.<sup>4</sup> What sort of popular feeling among rebels and their sympathisers did this symbolise? This article deals with the evidence of a growing racial anxiety, particularly in the poorer agricultural areas of the northern Orange Free State and south-western Transvaal, an area which was to become the epicentre of rebellion. The conception of Black Peril in these areas was very different to the mid-Victorian hysteria rampant in Natal in the 1870s and similar scares in Johannesburg in the early years of the twentieth century. While this latter fear was of the single black male as sexual predator in the urban milieu, the *platteland* anxieties, of the first two decades of the twentieth century, centred on the agricultural productive capability of the black family.<sup>5</sup>

This article hopes to achieve two things: to contribute to considerations of elements of white agrarian anxieties as the old order was replaced by the modernising state, and to explore a facet of the 1914 Rebellion that has hitherto been overlooked. The discussion seeks to be wary, as Novick reminds us, of using the trope of synecdoche, in which the part is presented as a microcosm of the whole, to draw generalised conclusions about the Black Peril cross-spatially and temporally,<sup>6</sup> and the focus is on a particular demographic sector in a specific time-frame. But there has not been much analysis of the Rebellion in terms of Black

3. TAD, SC 1-15; see also Rosenthal, *General de Wet*, 139.

4. Certainly, one of the names given to the 1914 Rebellion was the 'Five Shilling Rebellion', although there is some confusion over the name. Other interpretations are varied, ranging from a reference to the *per diem* rate offered by Kruger's government for commando service to the rate offered by the Germans for serving the Kaiser. It was also rumoured that the poor whites were offered five shillings a day to join the rebellion.

5. For a discussion of the difficulties in discussing anxiety as a social phenomenon, see A. Hunt, 'Anxiety and Social Explanation: Some Anxieties about Anxiety', *Journal of Social History*, 32, 3 (1999); for an appraisal of different varieties of anxieties and their consequences, see K. Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London and New York, 1998).

6. P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 621.

Peril. Today, nine decades later, there is still little consensus over interpretations of the Rebellion. It was an uprising by some 11 400 Boer men, about one per cent of the white population, at the outbreak of the First World War, ostensibly against the government's decision to go into the war on Britain's behalf. It has been interpreted variously as opposition to the government's proposed expedition to German South West Africa, as a demonstration of bitterness over General Hertzog's exclusion from Louis Botha's cabinet, and as a desire for the return of republican government.<sup>7</sup> In general, the uprising has largely been understood as a manifestation of embryonic Afrikaner nationalism, by both the liberal and Afrikaner nationalist historiographical traditions.<sup>8</sup> More recently, revisionists have elucidated an economic motivation. This article attempts to supplement the understanding of the social context of the movement provided, with a particular emphasis on Black Peril and social anxiety.

Outbreaks of anxiety – here we employ Hunt's conception of anxiety as a 'psychic condition of heightened sensitivity to some perceived threat, risk, peril or danger' – about black men and their potential threat occur at intervals in South Africa's history, and have been analysed in various ways.<sup>9</sup> 'Black Peril' was a recurring cry, and scares arose in Natal in the 1870s and in 1886, in the Cape, Transvaal and Natal in 1902–1903, and throughout the whole country in 1906–1908 and 1911–1912. The infrequency of assaults did not matter; the crime was of such symbolic importance that a single, ill-corroborated incident could raise a public uproar.<sup>10</sup> The scares did not end in those early decades.<sup>11</sup> For the urban

7. For analyses of the Rebellion, see J. Bottomley, 'The South African Rebellion: The Influence of Industrialization, Poverty and Poor Whiteism' (Seminar paper, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, June 1982); N.G. Garson, 'South Africa and World War I', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 8 (1979); 1; A.M. Grundlingh, 'Die Rebellie van 1914: 'n Historiografiese Verkenning', *Kleio*, 11, 1 & 2 (1979). See also A.M. Grundlingh, 'Probing the Prophet: The Politics and Psychology of the Siener van Rensburg Phenomenon', *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (1996); S.B. Spies, 'The Rebellion in South Africa, 1914–1915' (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1962); S. Swart, 'A Boer and his Gun and his Wife are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4 (1998); and S. Swart, 'Desperate Men: Rebellion and the Politics of Poverty in the 1914 Rebellion', *South African Historical Journal*, 42 (2000).
8. For the liberal tradition, see T.R.H. Davenport, 'The South African Rebellion', *English Historical Review*, 78 (1963); and for the Afrikaner nationalist school, see D. Scholtz, *Die Rebellie, 1914–1915* (Johannesburg, 1942).
9. For Hunt's definition and a discussion, see Hunt, 'Anxiety and Social Explanation', 509. For more on analyses of the panics over the threat perceived to be presented by black men, see, for example, D. O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934–1948* (Cambridge, 1983), 242. For a sophisticated psycho-historical assessment, see J. Krikler, 'Social Neurosis and Hysterical Pre-Cognition in South Africa: A Case-Study and Reflections', *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993).
10. It is hard to draw direct parallels with recently settled colonial states in other parts of Africa, as their white populations were proportionally much smaller and of a much more recent origin. Once the discrepancies are accepted, however, useful comparisons may be drawn. In Kenya and

English-speaker, Black Peril was symbolised by black male lust for white women.<sup>12</sup> It has been argued that Black Peril operated as an emotional signifier catalysed by psychological tension, economic recession, political uncertainty and industrial upheaval, sexual jealousy over 'the seduction of white women by black men', or alarm over a possible 'native' rebellion; Cornwell has contended that the white woman's body symbolised the ethnic body, using Fanon's notion that the 'individual body and the ethnic body are one'.<sup>13</sup> In the patriarchal construction of sexual intercourse, the male is dominant over a subordinate female: the horror of Black Peril was the domination of a member of the dominant race, in an act of insurrection as much as rape. Keegan has demonstrated compellingly that 'white masculinity' (which was perceived to be under threat) was indivisible from the exercise of racial power, and consequently concern over black sexual appeal or predation and white women's seditious sexuality fuelled crusades against anticipated black (sexual) aggression.<sup>14</sup> Etherington has argued that Black Peril was symptomatic of broader political anxiety,<sup>15</sup> while Van Onselen has established that Black Peril scares occurred in times of acute tension in the political economy. He has shown convincingly that the 1906–1908 scares coincided with an economic depression, the transfer of power by the British reconstruction administration to the *Het Volk* government, and that the pre-First World War scares occurred concur-

Southern Rhodesia, for example, there was a constant fear of a 'Native Rebellion' and subterranean anxiety which occasionally exploded into collective hysteria over the 'Black Peril': see D. Kennedy, *Islands of White: Settler Society in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia 1890–1939* (Durham, 1987).

11. The 1929 general election was the *Swart Gevaar*-election, with its emphasis on the threat of *oorstroming* (being overwhelmed). The election propaganda in 1948 was aimed at a social substratum that believed itself under threat by the black urban proletariat.
12. For extended discussion, see B. Brown, 'Facing the "Black Peril": The Politics of Population Control in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13, 2 (1987); G. Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the Social Meaning of "Black Peril" in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 3 (1996), 441; N. Etherington, 'Natal's Black Rape Scare of the 1870s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 1, (1988); H. Lubbe, 'The Myth Of "Black Peril": *Die Burger* and the 1929 Election', *South African Historical Journal*, 37 (1997); M. Strobel, *Becoming Visible* (Boston, 1987), 379; C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914* (Johannesburg, 1982). Even the Biggles' adventure resonates: *The Black Peril* (London, 1935).
13. Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril*', 441; similarly, for Southern Rhodesia, see J. McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902–1935* (Bloomington, 2000), 5.
14. T. Keegan, 'Gender, Degeneration and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa, ca. 1912', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 3 (2001).
15. Etherington explores Natal in the 1860s and 1870s, where the relatively few British settlers feared loss of control to Africans; settler insecurity was manifested in alarm over African rape of white females, despite almost total absence of evidence of such incidents: Etherington, 'Natal's Black Rape Scare', 36.

rently with political instability and white industrial action.<sup>16</sup> But whatever the underlying cause, the anxiety usually concerned (sometimes consensual but generally non-consensual) sex between single black men and white women.

The *platteland* Peril was a different kind of fear. This anxiety certainly contained and was articulated in powerful symbols similar to the more commonly discussed urban Black Peril scares. The *platteland* Peril was, for example, a metaphor for the loss of control of elements of state power, and it represented the dread of sexual contamination with the concomitant bio-social degeneracy of the poor white. Chiefly, however, the fear was economic. It was the gendered and class-bound fear of competition between the white male small farmers or *bywoners* and black families.

For a white land-owner in the poorer agricultural areas of the northern Orange Free State and south-western Transvaal, a black family labouring on his land simply made more financial sense than a white *bywoner* family.<sup>17</sup> Keegan reveals a telling incident, two years before De Wet's court case and the outbreak of the Rebellion. The Prime Minister, Louis Botha, who had been visiting rural constituencies, was asked by a farmer whether it was right that there were black people living in ease while hundreds of poor whites were in dire straits, to which Botha replied in the negative. Another farmer then stood up and said:

Well, gentlemen, I have seven *bywoners* on the farm and I've seven black families, and I get from one of those black families what I cannot get from the seven *bywoners* together. And so are you going to ask me to take food out of my mouth?

The sympathy of the crowd was manifestly not with him and cries of '*Donner hom!*' were heard.<sup>18</sup>

Competition with black cash-crop tenants was difficult for the *bywoner*.<sup>19</sup> Poorer, landless Boers often lacked experience in cultivation, while many black families already had arable skills.<sup>20</sup> The chief obstacle was the *bywoner* father's reluctance to use family labour. The head of the family required, instead, access to black labour. Emelia Poee remembered how her family competed with a white *bywoner* and his family. After a year, the latter was compelled to move on:

16. Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand*, 16. For a useful parallel, see also C. van Onselen, 'Paternalism and Violence on the Maize Farms of the South-Western Transvaal, 1900–1950', in A. Jeeves and J. Crush, eds, *White Farms, Black Labor: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910–1950* (Pietermaritzburg, 1997), 210.
17. T. Keegan, 'The Restructuring of Agrarian Class Relations in a Colonial Economy: The Orange River Colony, 1902–1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 2 (1979).
18. T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), 181.
19. T. Matsetela, 'The Life Story of Nkgona Mma Poee: Aspects of Sharecropping and Proletarianisation in the Northern Orange Free State 1890–1930', in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, eds, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class, Culture and Consciousness 1870–1930* (London, 1982).
20. Often the white males' previous livelihoods had been as *trekboers*, transport riders or hunters.

With us blacks, I would go out into the fields with my husband and perhaps with my children if they were already old enough. With the Boers as 'bywoners' it was different. Normally their wives could not go out into the fields to hoe. The husband would have to do the hoeing alone. Or sometimes he would take out money to pay for whomever he could hire.<sup>21</sup>

Women in black sharecropping families did the hoeing and weeding, and played a role in the threshing and reaping, whereas white men were reluctant to use white female labour; and child labour, although utilised in the fields, was increasingly frowned upon. Moreover, the white *bywoner* male did not normally use kinship networks to establish co-operative labour arrangements. *Bywoners* were also more resistant to placing themselves under the authority of the landlord. Whites also required cash rather than payment in crops or livestock. The 1908 Orange River Colony Natives Administration Commission noted:

The majority [of farmers] prefer to work with blacks rather than with whites, first because the latter demand a larger share of the profits, and secondly because they are more independent and less amenable to discipline and cannot be set to perform the same work as natives.<sup>22</sup>

### **Agrarian Relations Between Black and White**

Prior to the South African War, the *bywoner* still had an important role in the pastoral rural economy. Anti-squatting legislation limited the number of black families to five per farm in the Orange Free State.<sup>23</sup> In the south-western Transvaal and north-eastern Orange Free State, *bywoners* had been useful on pastoral farms – overseeing isolated cattle and transport-riding. There was an impetus towards cultivation, but pastoralism remained predominant in the south-western Transvaal prior to the South African War.<sup>24</sup> Pastoral areas were also more unappealing to black peasants, so there was a perennial labour shortage which the *bywoner* could fill. The pastoral farmers in the south and west supported anti-squatting legislation, believing forced labour dispersal would increase the supply in the dry regions. In the arable districts of the north and east, however, which were to become prime rebel country, landowners were already beginning to find excuses to get rid of *bywoners* and their families. The latter were regarded as less productive than black peasants and had larger cash requirements. Black squatter settlements led to fissures in white society: anti-squatting legislation was propelled by the mass of

21. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 31.

22. Quoted in Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 32.

23. Keegan, 'The Restructuring of Agrarian Class Relations', 235.

24. M. Nkdimeng and G. Relly, 'Kas Maine: The Story of a Black South African Agriculturalist', in B. Bozzoli, ed., *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular Response* (Johannesburg, 1983), 92.

small farmers, tenants and *bywoners* who were concerned not only with the labour supply but also with their own security, status, social standing and access to land. There was an upsurge in resentment against the independent African peasantry, because of the need to compete for markets and patronage. The geography of the Rebellion is largely explained by the economic situation, helping the historian to find the answer as to why the Rebellion was limited to only a few northern Orange Free State and western Transvaal districts.<sup>25</sup> Part of the answer lies in the fact that *bywoners* were being replaced more ruthlessly by white land owners, and the *platteland* Black Peril was a more powerful concept under those conditions – which was in turn manipulated by the rebel leadership, which emphasised the reluctance of the State to take any real measures against the process.<sup>26</sup>

As discussed, the end of the South African War saw black peasants better equipped to deal with the post-war economy than the small white farmer, after the extensive devastation of farms, livestock and lack of cash. By contrast, the black peasantry had accumulated stock and farming equipment.<sup>27</sup> Many black people moved out of the crowded Basutoland at the end of the war, across the Caledon river and into the Orange River Colony, where larger white farmers welcomed black families with livestock and equipment. The increase in the black population in the territory was noted by white farmers, and black sharecropping became a primary feature of farming in its arable districts.<sup>28</sup> Initially it was accepted as a temporary measure until white farming could get on its feet again, but it took root in the soil of the *platteland*.

During the period of reconstruction, 1902–1910, after attempts at establishing a class of British yeomen farmers failed, the administration tried to co-opt the Boer landed class for collaboration. Consequently settler capitalism was promoted over peasant production, black and white.<sup>29</sup> Free black squatter-peasant communities interfered with the distribution of labour resources. The huge amount of capital injected into post-war reconstruction (leading to new equipment, railway extension and experimental agricultural techniques) was heavily weighted towards the *arable* farming sector. Lord Milner's administration had been against tenancy, both sharecropping and labour, and appeared determined to transform black tenants into wage labourers, primarily to free labour for the gold-mines, and to compel squatters to

25. And also to Kenhardt in the north-western Cape and Middelburg in the eastern Transvaal: see R. Morrell, 'Competition and Cooperation in Middelburg, 1900–1930', in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido, eds, *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850–1930* (Johannesburg, 1986), 373–419.
26. Hertzog noted that rebellion was limited to 'those six or seven districts in the north [of the Free State]': TAD, SC 1–1915, *Select Committee on the Rebellion*, 247.
27. *South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903–1905*, vol. 4 (Cape Town, 1904).
28. UG 22–16, *Natives Land Commission*, 3.
29. The arable parts of the Orange River Colony could be made to produce wheat and maize and replace the expensive importation of foreign grain.

become wage-labourers on capitalising farms.<sup>30</sup> The move towards capital intensive farming was slow, but was facilitated by the state with easy capital and credit, as the massive market of the Witwatersrand stimulated a cash-crop economy, and also required wage-labourers. The 1912 Land Bank Act deleted all provisions for loans to non-landowners.<sup>31</sup> The South African Native Affairs Commission had represented an attempt at social engineering to eliminate tenancy, allowing labour tenancy only as a bridge to wage labour. To this end, bills were introduced to both the Transvaal and Orange River Colony legislatures in 1908, designed to prevent black tenancy other than as labourers. These bills were not implemented, but they were forerunners of the anti-squatting clauses of the 1913 Natives Land Act.<sup>32</sup>

The Land Act laid down that the only legal form of rent payment by black tenants to white landlords was to be labour service.<sup>33</sup> Pre-1913 sharecropping had made the black man a 'partner' of the landowner, but the new Master and Servant legislation of 1913 was an attempt to compel autonomous black peasant families to become wage labourers.<sup>34</sup> This benefited the labour-craving, progressive farmers, for whom the bargaining power of black tenants proved an obstacle to productive farming. The Act was not strictly enforced, however, with few prosecutions. Indeed, through the second decade of the twentieth century, there was actually a growth in share-cropping, encouraging possibilities for young black farmers.<sup>35</sup> The disparagement of 'kaffir farmers' and landlords who let squatters 'infest' their lands increased – ironically both on the part of progressive capitalising white farmers who wanted the erstwhile squatters as wage labourers, and by *bywoners* who wanted their place on the farms as tenants. But the shrillness of the demands indicates that they were not being met.<sup>36</sup> Wage labour was scarce in the

30. This was similar to the anti-squatting laws of the Republics, which were not intended to limit tenancy but to redistribute labour in response to calls by poor farmers.

31. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 35.

32. They were not implemented in anticipation of the coming National Convention: see T. Keegan, 'The Sharecropping Economy, African Class Formation and the 1913 Natives Land Act in the Highveld Maize Belt', in Bozzoli, *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal*, 115. For a window into the apprehension of white farmers over land distribution, see *South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903–1905*; see also J. Higginson, 'Upending the Century of Wrong: Agrarian Elites, Collective Violence, and the Transformation of State Power in the American South and South Africa, 1865–1914' in A. Zegeye, ed., *Social Identities in the New South Africa*, vol. 1, *After Apartheid* (Cape Town, 2001).

33. Section 7 (3) of Act 27–1913. In the Transvaal sharecropping contracts could remain.

34. There was some opposition to the demise of share cropping by young farmers setting up or for farmers heavily mortgaged and unable to release their capital. So, while there was condemnation of 'kaffir-farming', there were many who relied on the system. The Natives Land Act accelerated dispossession of land, making blacks more vulnerable to the demands of white wage labour. Morrell, however, has shown one must tread warily in generalising about the Act: R. Morrell, 'African Land Purchase and the 1913 Natives Land Act in the Eastern Transvaal', *South African Historical Journal*, 21 (1989).

35. Nkadimeng and Relly, 'Kas Maine', 96.

36. Keegan, 'The Sharecropping Economy', 116.

western Transvaal and the government was reluctant to enforce legislation that would disrupt the black peasantry's major agricultural production, since white farmers alone could not produce enough for the growing market on the Witwatersrand.<sup>37</sup>

The 1913 Land Act was thus, in essence, an intervention by the state on behalf of progressive, capitalising white farmers, especially in the Orange Free State.<sup>38</sup> Not only was sharecropping maintained and the state's efforts to replace it ineffectual, but even had it been successful it would not have returned the *bywoner* to the land. Rather, black families would have remained, albeit as wage labourers. The Act did not bring the salvation envisioned by the dispossessed *bywoner* – instead of returning him and his family to the land, it merely facilitated the use of black wage labourers by wealthier white land owners, although in many ways the Act was impracticable. White *bywoners* became increasingly frustrated at its impotence in returning them to the land.<sup>39</sup> Rural poor whites – the landless, the *bywoners*, the small-holders on sub-divided plots – had originally greeted the new administration with some relief; now they were disillusioned. Instead of the reunion between men and the land they ploughed, an event to which they had been looking forward, the old solidarity of Boer society disintegrated rapidly along the fissures of capitalist property relations.<sup>40</sup> Resentment was almost inevitably visited on black squatters, mixed up with bitterness towards black labour on the larger farms denied to the white *bywoners*. The indignation at peasant independence was tied up in the class hostilities fissuring white society, between *bywoners* and *heerenboeren* (landlord farmers), but populism and class rivalry focused on black labour.

Following the South African War, there was, as has been suggested, an increasing reliance by wealthier white landowners, the *heerenboeren*, on black labour.<sup>41</sup> But there was an ambiguous boundary between real and contrived resentment towards this phenomenon. There were examples of the manipulation of racial fear on the part of the rebel leadership, conflating the black labour issue with other socio-political concerns of the capitalising polity. The rebel leader Manie Maritz, for example, was prone to saying publicly that he did not want 'the land ruled by Englishmen, niggers and jews'.<sup>42</sup> The capitalisation and commercialisation of farming affected more than the livelihood of the *bywoner* – his sense of identity was challenged. Even those men who had not owned land before felt that their identities were under threat. There was originally no shame in being a *bywoner*. He and his family were welcomed by landowners for the share given

37. Nkadameng and Relly, 'Kas Maine', 98.

38. Keegan, 'The Sharecropping Economy', 109.

39. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 183.

40. *Orange River Colony Poor White Commission*, 1908; Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 250.

41. For an insightful theorised distinction between *heerenboeren* and *bywoner*, see Bottomley, 'The South African Rebellion'.

42. UG 10–15, 28, 63.

from their crops, for their service on commando, and for the status they lent him. Although the complete egalitarianism of Boer society was a myth, there had been a rhetoric of equality, the form of republican *gelykheid* or equality between white adult men that was purportedly unaffected by class.<sup>43</sup> It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that landlessness became a decisive determining factor in the process of class differentiation.<sup>44</sup> Following the economic changes, however, the landless *bywoner's* status declined, not because of the land shortage, but because of the commercialisation of farming – he changed from status symbol to albatross around the neck of the capitalising farmer.<sup>45</sup> Rev. J.D. Kestell noted to the 1938 Peoples' Economic Congress how the position of *bywoners* had changed over time: 'Our forefathers had time for *bywoners*. The children learnt to respect the *bywoner*. He ate at the same table as the landowner and he could feel that blood crawls where it cannot run.'<sup>46</sup>

In the build-up to the Rebellion, there had been many indignant farmers' meetings to discuss the issue. A 1912 Congress was held in Reitz in the Orange Free State to establish a *boerenbond* (farmers' union) to push for the end of the share-cropping economy, and to enforce master-servant contracts on all tenants. For example, General J.J. Wolmarans, who was to become a rebel leader, joined with other farmer-politicians to form a 'White League' to enforce this legislation, as it was felt the state was failing in this regard. Wolmarans had been prosecuted for trying to evict a black man from the train compartment in which they were traveling, whereupon a 'commando' of 300 men had converged on Pretoria to express outrage, and the case was remanded. This resulted in the founding of the White League at a meeting in Pretoria, with much bombast about finding all black passengers and throwing them out of all trains.<sup>47</sup> Lynch law never actually took over, but there were protest meetings which stopped just short of it. N.W. Serfontein wanted to form an organisation whose 'aim was to ensure the 'natural rights' of white men and to make South Africa a 'white man's country'.<sup>48</sup> The sharecropper Kas Maine noted the following of a white man's idea of renting a farm and allowing black sharecroppers to work it while he reaped the profits: 'Some other Boers became jealous saying that he had hired a farm for "Kaffirs" and that we were staying free ... "He hired a farm for blacks while we whites

43. *Volkseenheid* was a teleological imposition, born out of the need for political unity at specific times. Quite the opposite of this mystical unity existed: the group was historically prone to factionalism, divided on lines of class, region, province, ideology, and personal ambition.

44. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 20.

45. S. Trapido, 'Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth in the South African Republic, 1850–1900', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), 359.

46. *Ibid.*, 359.

47. See 'Real Racial Issue', *The Friend*, 3 Apr. 1912.

48. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 182.

suffer.” They took it and divided it amongst white tenants.<sup>49</sup> The discourse of resentment over class differences and economic anxiety had come to be couched in concerns over the peril to the *platteland*, and De Wet and other leaders were able to draw the new political grievances into this paradigm through populist rhetoric.<sup>50</sup>

The men who heeded De Wet’s racialised speeches were those who had been dispossessed by evolving rural capitalism and the productive power of the black family as a labouring unit. Grundlingh has shown that General de Wet maintained a paternal relationship with the poor white community, essentially his *seigneuries*, at the ‘Kopjes (Koppies) Nedersetting’.<sup>51</sup> The ‘men of influence’ were, in essence, community fathers operating on domestic principles extended into the public milieu.<sup>52</sup> The government had assumed official control of Kopjes in 1910, but De Wet had managed to retain his links, and he held several meetings in September and October 1914, just prior to the uprising. He was able to win wide rebel support in the settlement, as an extension of his almost feudal patronage system, with himself as *paterfamilias*.<sup>53</sup> Among this and other similar groups, it was increasingly feared that whites would have to make way for black *indringing* and *oorheersing* (‘infiltration’ and ‘domination’).

There was, as has been noted, an ambiguous boundary between real and contrived fear of the *platteland* Peril. There had been examples of the manipulation of racial fear on the part of the rebel leadership, conflating the Peril with other socio-political concerns of which De Wet’s ‘Five Shilling’ speech is an obvious example. But he had used his constituency’s anxieties over the issue on previous occasions, by playing on grievances over black labour to gather support, simultaneously repairing the fissures that had opened up between *heerenboeren* and *bywoners*, and lambasting the government.<sup>54</sup> On 22 October 1914, at the poor white

49. Nkadameng and Relly, ‘Kas Maine’, 98.

50. Populism referred to mass mobilisation among rural whites, encouraged by the inroads made by big capital and black competition. Populist rhetoric was anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist and Afrikaans in its cultural symbolism, and, in this case, appears very masculinist.

51. Grundlingh, ‘Die Rebellie van 1914’.

52. For an analysis of this patriarchal leadership, see S. Swart, “‘Men of Influence’: The Ontology of Leadership in the 1914 Boer Rebellion”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 17 (2004).

53. This should be understood in a broader gendered context, incorporating the role of women in the Rebellion, because the omission of women produces not only an incomplete picture, but distorts the fabric of the historical event. For a gendered analysis of the Rebellion itself, see Swart, ‘A Boer and his Gun and his Wife’.

54. An interesting historical parallel to the De Wet case occurred in 1908 and 1910–11 in Rhodesia, where Black Peril scares sparked popular panic. It was not the assault itself, but rather the commutation of the convicted men’s death sentences by the British High Commissioner. A crisis in 1902 was precipitated by the light sentencing of a British South Africa Company judge. Underlying discontent with Company rule was tied up with settler insistence on the death penalty and threats of lynching. They were a symbolic assertion of outside interference as much as a lesson to black men. In Kenya too, the recently elected head of the Colonists’ Association held a theatrical flogging in front of the government buildings in 1907, an act which was interpreted as a direct challenge to the metropole’s authority: Kennedy, *Islands of White*, 145.

settlement at Kopjes, in which he was an influential figure, he referred to 'the question of the natives being allowed to roam about and not being controlled as they used to be controlled'.<sup>55</sup> De Wet spoke about the way

in which the natives were allowed to move about; that the pass laws had been knocked on the head and that the natives were in the same position as the whites; coolies had been allowed entry into the country and that the language was not being given its fair position. It was the principle involved of allowing the natives to do as they liked; to march through the countryside without being controlled by passes. Again, the people of the Free State are unanimously against the introduction of any asiatics ... but since Union this has been weakened ...<sup>56</sup>

An important dimension of this Peril is to be found in the way that the class fractures between *heerenboeren* and *bywoners* were papered over by appealing to their common heritage, including their sense of shared masculinity, and emphasising the threat that was presented to it by independent black labour. Real and imagined fears and threats included a popular local rumour that had it that there were 'armed bands of natives in uniform wandering the country'.<sup>57</sup> In a way that paralleled anxieties found in urban areas, fear was also occasionally mobilised as moral outrage against bio-social contamination by black blood.<sup>58</sup> If, as Jeffrey Weeks has argued, sex 'has been a transmission belt for wider social anxieties',<sup>59</sup> then it is not difficult to understand that sex and ideas about miscegenation and the decline of the white race were incorporated into the anxiety. However, the anxiety emerging in the rural Boer communities was distinct from the perspective pervasive in the urban areas. In the former, instead of the fear of rape by lone black men, there was a fear that poor white families in the rural areas would become tainted by sheer proximity to black families, both spatially and in terms of living standards. This may also reflect the loss of control over white Boer women, since increasingly they were going to find work in the cities, and poor white men felt a loss of control over their socio-sexuality. There was also the fear that young white girls going to look for work in the towns, and through inexperience, loneliness and the lack of parental and community influence would become sexually involved with black men.<sup>60</sup> Although sometimes the male head of the dispossessed family

55. TAD, SC 1–1915, 295.

56. TAD, SC 1–1915, Testimony of Charles Gustav Fichardt, 306.

57. *House of Assembly Debates* (1915), col. 63.

58. See *Die Hertzogsprake*, vol 2. *March 1910 – March 1913* (Pretoria, 1977). In 1914, marriage between black and white was not expressly forbidden, as it would be by the Immorality Act (no. 5) of 1927, but there was no provision for it under the law.

59. J. Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (London, 1985), 16.

60. The idea of the sexual degeneracy of the poor white is common and found in different temporal and geographical contexts. A study of modern urbanising Appalachians, for example, found similar stereotypes, expressed in jokes like: 'A virgin in Kentucky is the sister who can outrun her brothers.' See W. Philliber and C. McCoy, eds, *The Invisible Minority: Urban Appalachians*

would move to centres like the Rand in search of work, it was frequently the unmarried female members of the family who first moved to the urban areas. This reversal of the usual pattern of black migrant labour may be explained by the sexual division of labour. Control over black women's labour within black societies by the bridewealth system meant male migrant labour could occur without the household collapsing and with rural production carrying on much as before. The Boer traditional household was less flexible than was the average black household in the face of industrialisation, and female heads of families seldom stayed on in the rural areas. Young women would move to the towns on a permanent basis and send back a little money to their families.<sup>61</sup>

The proponents of the 1913 Natives Land Act emphasised the dangers of poor whiteism and the threat it presented to racial supremacy.<sup>62</sup> Sexuality has been analysed discursively to show how it was instrumental in transmitting meanings. This iconography and symbolism helped as a 'graphic substantiation of who was, so to speak, on the bottom and who was on the top'.<sup>63</sup> But it lay not just in the iconography of racial policy, but in the material substance of Boer life; the *cordon sanitaire* around the Boer family was broken literally in terms of geographic space, life-style and socio-sexual intercourse. It is also important to bear in mind that the Boer myth of telegony, which is the belief that the first mating influences all the subsequent progeny of the mother, was an integral part of the socio-sexual world-view. That telegony was a widely and firmly held belief may be gauged from General Botha's refusal to change his mind in the face of opposing scientific argument: 'If you cross an Afrikaner cow with a Friesland bull, you will never get pure red calves from her.'<sup>64</sup> The journalist and poet C. Louis Leipoldt noted that this belief in telegony was certainly a factor in the rural communities, and drew a parallel with the southern states of America. He had once talked to a white farmer whose daughter had been raped by a black man, and discovered that the farmer believed that his daughter had been 'ruined for life'. 'Her children will always have that blood in them.'<sup>65</sup>

(Lexington, 1987), 22.

61. See R. Morrell, ed., *White But Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880-1940* (Pretoria, 1992). A mainly urban commission was held to investigate 'Assaults on Women' in 1913: *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into Assaults on Women*, UG 39-13 (Cape Town, 1913).
62. There is a parallel to the American Reconstruction South. The Black Codes were designed to keep blacks as valuable workers, but simultaneously keep them from becoming 'uppity'. Upward mobility brought suspicion from poor white neighbours, and the hooded night-time terror of the Ku Klux Klan. See G. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York, 1981).
63. A. Stoler, 'Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia', in M. di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge* (Berkeley, 1991), 54.
64. C. Louis Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor* (Johannesburg, 1937, 1980), 234.
65. *Ibid.*, 234.

It was not only sexual, but predominately social, intercourse that permeated on the minds of the *bywoner* men. E.G. Malherbe, a social scientist concerned throughout this period with white poverty, described a shameful and little-mentioned act performed by the white male *bywoner*. As part of the process of 'verkaffering' (becoming black), a *bywoner* might go to the neighbouring 'native' kraal and use his few donkeys to plough for the 'native'. As payment he would receive a pig, a calf or maybe a heifer. Usually his family would accompany and wait for him. 'Sometimes the African women would take pity on [his wife] and offer her some beer as well as companionship.'<sup>66</sup> This way of earning meat was not explicitly talked about in white society, and was referred to euphemistically by saying: 'We go to earn.'<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusions – Black Peril, White Rebel

Malherbe noted that his research in the first half of this century was profoundly influenced by what he saw as a striking comparison between the rural poor whites in South Africa and the United States of America, particularly in terms of racial attitudes.<sup>68</sup> In the USA, attacks on black men in the form of lynching, as a manifestation of the fears of Black Peril, was a crime of small towns and the countryside, and it was clearly a mixture of social and economic anxieties. He quoted Walter White who noted: 'Lynching is much more an expression of Southern fear of Negro progress than of Negro crime.' The poorer the white, the more he or she clung to their whiteness, within economic constraints. This begs for comparative analysis, because in South Africa, populist rhetoric manipulated anxieties over whiteness in order to paper over the ruptures in Boer society and to focus bitterness against the government. The men who listened to De Wet's racialised oratory were those who had been alienated by developing rural capitalism and the competitive advantage of the black family as labouring unit. De Wet's paternal relationship with his poor white *seigneuries* allowed him to promote this anxiety at black *oorheersing*. There were indignant protests at the vision of whites having to compete with blacks for resources and patronage from landowners.

The concerns about blacks were not only symbolic, but predicated on a harsh material reality: the loss of control over black labour and the competition black producers were beginning to present. Black Peril thus meant something different to the poor white farmers of the north-eastern Orange Free State and south-western Transvaal on the eve of the Rebellion: it meant something related to the issue of class and race – the erosion of both white patronage and the old racialised paternal order. Thus the rural fear was that of competition – that the black man and his

66. E.G. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment* (Cape Town, 1981), 137.

67. 'Ons gaan verdien'.

68. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment*, 169.

family could and would out-produce him – and that the presence of the more economically competitive black squatter family was more welcome by the Boer landed gentry. To a much more limited degree, it incorporated the sexual element of the more characteristically urban hysteria, in that it fostered concern over urbanising poor white women debasing the *volk* through miscegenation. Both symbolic and material concerns were articulated by populist leaders, who used them to disguise fissures in white society, and to motivate people to rebel against the capitalising state which, reacting to the new needs of the mercantile and mining sector, would not control black labour in older ways. This contributes to our understanding of the geographic specificity of the Rebellion, and helps to explain the class of person who got involved. Thus, it could be said that the Rebellion was, at least, partly about trying to retain what it meant to be a white man in a changing world.

This was part of a world view that was seeping away. Even after his arrest, General de Wet made a desperate attempt to retain control of a mental paradigm in which the white male was hegemonic. On his way to prison, De Wet was put in a horse-drawn trap, driven by a coloured police constable.<sup>69</sup> As the tin-houses of Vryburg came into view, he made a last attempt to cling to his position, his place in the hierarchy of colour and race, by trying to reward his gaoler as he would a servant. He turned to the constable and, after feeling his empty pockets, pulled out his tobacco-pouch, shook an ounce or two into the palm of the driver and said to his captor: 'Well driven, my boy.'<sup>70</sup>

69. Rosenthal, *General de Wet*, 153.

70. 'Goed gedryf, my jong'.