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0521530598 - Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902

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The South African War (1899–1902) is no longer treated as ‘a white man’s war’ by historians. Black South Africans were drawn into service by both sides, and the war affected the black communities in a variety of complex ways. Dr Nasson has written a closely focused regional study of the conflict in the Cape Colony, describing the dramatic participation of black people in the conduct of the war, and their subsequent exclusion from the fruits of peace. (The Abraham Esau of the title, a patriotic Coloured artisan, was murdered by Boer guerrillas.) Dr Nasson sets the conflict in the context of Cape political culture and social life at the turn of the century. This is a major contribution to South African and imperial history.

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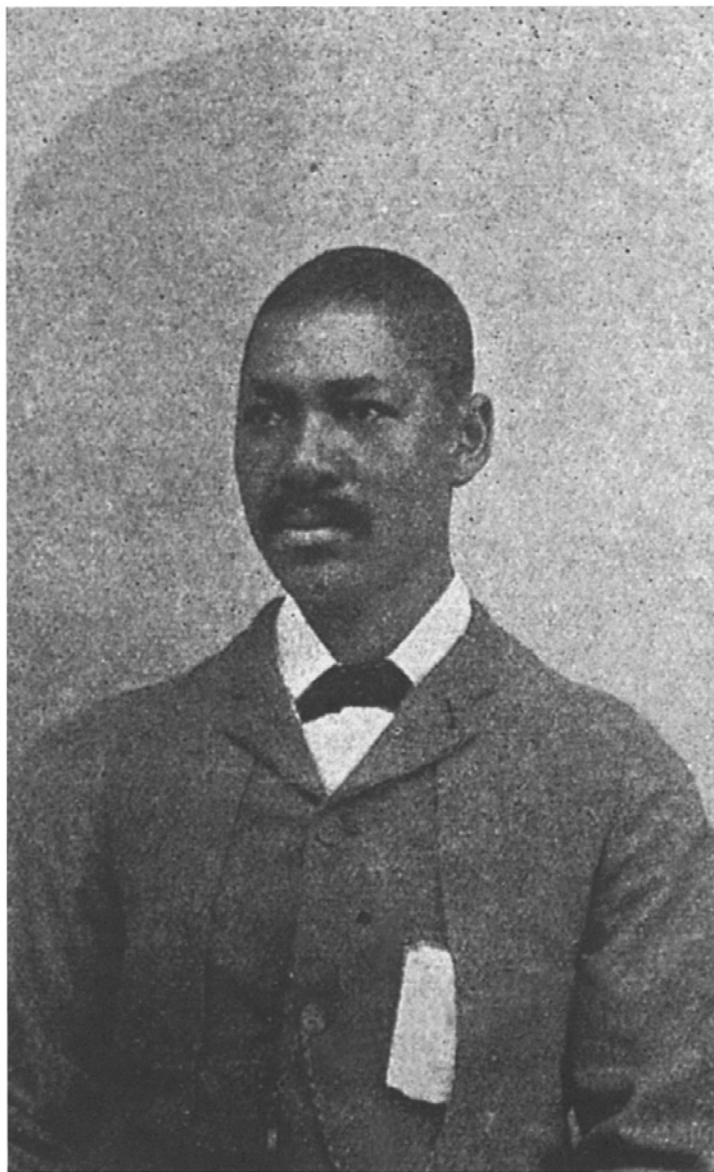
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The Calvinia martyr: Abraham Esau, the Coloured man lashed and murdered by the Boers. From *The Cape Times Weekly*, 13 March 1901.

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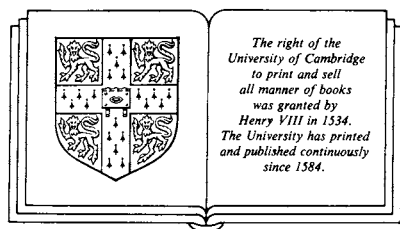
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ABRAHAM ESAU'S WAR

A Black South African War in the Cape,
1899-1902

BILL NASSON

*Department of Economic History
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To the memory of Joe Nasson

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I hope you will not mind, I am a coloured boy of 18. My skin is coloured but my heart is bold . . . my master is very good to me but I am going to leave him just for the sake of our Empire and Queen. I will take the rifle in my hand and the bandolier round my body.

Letter to the Prince of Wales' Light Horse, from Pieter Albertus, Caledon:
Umtata Herald, 20 April 1901

Even now at night, one wakes up in horror, fancying the native town guard are all about the house, and are firing at you.

Olive Schreiner Letters, UCTL, MMPUS/BC16/D.60/241,
O. Schreiner to F. Schreiner, 30 June 1902

Panic in him and round him
like a wind-flapped tilt –
only the sable sons of Ham
cram Death's dark veld.

from Tony Harrison, 'Voortrekker', *The School of Eloquence*
(Rex Collings, London, 1978)

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Preface and acknowledgements

In Anthony Sher's novel, *Middlepost*, two roving characters, Issy and Smous, stumble upon a corpse lying in the open. It is shortly after the end of the South African War, and in the rusting silence one of them makes an instinctive connection. "Mmm" . . . said Issy, his mind elsewhere, "this was a Boer district. Killed in the war, I suppose." Ahead on the left, a man was lying in the gutter . . . "You seen one before?", asked Issy. "A dead body?" . . . Issy laughed. "No, I mean a Bushman."¹ The 'Boer district' could be anywhere in the Cape; it could be Mafeking or Kimberley. It is, however, Calvinia. A remote spot not known for sieges, diamonds or the prototypical Boy Scout movement, it has its share of 'Bushman' corpses in the war years. It was also the source of a complex of black reactions and responses to 'the white man's war', which found expression in a certain village radicalism and a pugnacious folklore: its hero was a wily Coloured blacksmith, Abraham Esau.

This Cape artisan's historical identity crystallised in the moment of war; it hardened in his bluff attachment to British imperialism and Cape liberalism, in his anti-Boer agitation and conspiratorial intelligence organisation against threatening Boer Republicanism, in his capture and execution by an invading commando in 1901. For the local black population, death invested Abraham Esau with martyrdom, and his experience and actions generated an abiding mythology. In sum, the martyring of a Coloured patriot encapsulated a memory of the distinctive pressures and conflicts of a Cape colonial war experience. For the myth-making of the Abraham Esau episode has meaning in that it represents what Roland Barthes has termed 'an instantaneous reserve of history',² here a regenerative memory of a South African War which was a crisis of identity for black people and classes in the Cape. The core of Esau's experience and the active engagement that flowed from it were firmly rooted in local conditions of existence; the ordinary blacksmith may be assimilated to a tumultuous world in which ordinary men and women were extraordinary men and women, living in defence of their rights and everyday concerns as Cape citizens in tough times.

The story of Abraham Esau and the significance of his claim upon our historical consciousness of the South African War are therefore of central relevance to this book. He is an important presence here because, to gloss the ideas of Marcus Rediker, Robert Skidelsky and others, the impersonal larger movements of warfare and the 'logic' of social crisis found a coordinate in a particular human life, and in the historically

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grounded dispositions that made up that life. This book is therefore called *Abraham Esau's War* not just on account of the individuality of the figure whom readers will encounter in chapter 7, but because of its typology; an appreciation of the ways in which Abraham Esau understood the meanings of the South African War and sustained wartime actions begins to reclaim not only one subject's individual experience, but the 'intellectual present'³ in which so many rural Cape artisans, workers and peasants thought and acted.

It remains to us, then, to look more closely later in this book at the sort of figure Abraham Esau was, and the impact he had on politics and society in his time – and after. For in this attempt both to write a regional history and to tell a story, I hope that it is clear that in a good deal of what follows it is the presence of Abraham Esau that matters. But before exploring the thick texture of wartime social experience for black people in the Cape Colony, we need to consider briefly the broader historical boundaries of our subject. In this respect, an appropriate starting point is perhaps a dual question: why another study of the South African War? What does the social interpretation which follows have to add to the existing historiography on the war?

The South African War of 1899–1902 seems to hold a perennial fascination for historians, and rightly so. As a major colonial war of British imperialism against the Boer or Afrikaner Republics, it has produced and can still provide essential evidence for continuing discussion and debate over imperial needs and ambitions and the development of an alliance between state and capital as a central, directive force in the capitalist integration and development of Southern Africa after 1910.⁴ While the scholarly social – as distinct from the economic or political – history of the war has long been a virtually fallow field, more recently stones have been turned, ploughs have been busy and furrows have appeared. The 'internal' social and economic data of the conflict has begun to ripen for harvesting; thanks to some of the contributions to the war historiography we can move beyond those abiding images of the concentration camps or imperial military disasters at Spion Kop or Modder River to some appreciation of such varied elements as the position of African mineworkers on the Rand, the day-to-day relations of working-class British troops, or the class composition of Boer National Scouts.

If we now have an improving picture of the general social landscape and human matrix of the South African crisis, the definition and meaning of the war experience remains an important question. What was the content, and what were the divisions and terms of the South African War? In great measure the answer depends on *whose* war one means and in which sector it was located – the burden of the war effort differed sharply in the way in which it pressed upon regions. Whatever the answer – which might reveal relations between Boer landlords and *bywoners* (non-landowning rural poor whites) or agrarian dislocation and food shortages as crucial issues in the social history of the war – informed historians now know that any definition of the conflict exclusively in terms of 'a white man's war' is a distortion of historical reality. Its course and outcome cannot be fully appreciated outside the context of the engagement of black South Africans with developments.

This interpretation stresses the centrality of the experiences and material conditions of black people in the war, and it tries to do so through studies of a specific people in

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specific relations and situations. This history is therefore in no sense an attempt at a 'totalising' history of the black population in the war. Several years ago, Peter Warwick published his pioneering synthetic survey, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1983), which opened up many of the dimensions of the topic, and without whose example I could probably not have written as I have. Where appropriate, I have tried to situate the formation and self-activity of Cape African and Cape Coloured people within the wider national context sketched so admirably by Warwick's *Black People and the South African War*. But this book remains emphatically a regional or local study, imbued with the indigenous life, culture and consciousness of a locality. If this account of the Cape 'people's war' can help to illuminate something of the fullness of popular human experience in these years of upheaval and transition, then Abraham Esau and his kind will, one hopes, have provided impetus for possible further micro-studies. And their lives and dramatic struggles will have been at least partially rescued from the relative 'condescension of posterity', in a radical South African historiography which still provides very largely the Witwatersrand side of the story of the transformations of these years.

To appropriate a useful expression from that vintage Marxist historian, Gwyn Williams, following Georges Sorel, this book might best be described as a 'diremption': a selection of essential movements, practices and patterns which I hope represent a living conjuncture of wrestling historical forces. My principal purpose in producing this book is to assess the meaning of the South African War for the black population of the Cape Colony and to subject its most characteristic dynamics there to historical examination. The book is an attempt to reconstruct something of the *atmosphere* of the Cape dimensions to the war; for the atmosphere in a generalised crisis is, as Ronald Fraser has suggested in his Spanish Civil War study, 'a social emanation . . . never more than at a time of extreme social crisis does the atmosphere become a determining factor in the way people respond to events. For, however intangible, it is never abstract or distant. It is what people feel. And what people feel lays the ground for their actions.'⁵ Here, above all, the war assumed the image of a claustrophobic social crisis; its intensely localised tensions and loyalties were multiple and sharp. Much concerning the particular momentum of events in the Cape will be related here; but that momentum of conflict also reveals a good deal else. As war-fever rocked the colony, the social, economic and cultural tonality of the area became highlighted, as did the rippling ideas and beliefs which lent purpose and cohesion to the efforts of communities and individuals to survive and defend their interests and identities. In short, social turmoil, agrarian clashes and the mushrooming of militia and other British auxiliary forces helped to shape the Cape's distinctive turn-of-the-century history; they also expressed much of, and explained much about, the historical inheritance of that area which did not dissolve in the massive capitalist transition and realignment of this formative era.

I believe, then, that the topic of this book raises issues which are relevant to an understanding of the diverse and influential cluster of forces which have assisted in the making of a layered black experience, as subject societies were blanketed in the present century by the spread of an integrated, settler-dominated capitalist state. What

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follows, therefore, is also intended as a modest contribution to a writing of South African history which sees that history as a contested site for meanings and experiences from below as well as from above; or, as John Iliffe has recently put it, the 'rewriting of South African history as the product of struggle between all the elements in society, rather than as a design imposed by dominant settlers or capitalists'.⁶ What this points to is treatment of a spectrum of evolving relationships, radiating both inward and outward as South African society underwent dramatic material transformations. As depicted by Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone in their edited collection, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa*, a major representation is the question of the 'interrelationships between the political economy, imperial and local, and class formation, between different sections of the working class and different classes, between class, culture and consciousness'.⁷ I hope this book conveys some sense of one interesting strand in that history.

Sources for the social history of the South African War are plentiful. For all that, records concerned directly with the conduct of African or Coloured people are rather uneven in quality and are very widely scattered. For example, we do not have a statistical record of their war service; it is no exaggeration to state that there are probably better figures for draught animals purchased by the transport brigades of the Grenadier Guards than for that regiment's contingent of Mfengu, Sotho and Coloured scouts and transport riders. Any statistical illuminations in this study are therefore limited and no more than elementary. The following account of war experience accordingly rests squarely upon a bedrock of qualitative source material. Naturally, the overwhelming bulk of this material was produced by British or white colonial participants and observers. Most especially because they were produced in the heady atmosphere of war crisis, these varied letters, reports and other papers have needed a particularly critical appraisal of the reliability of their picture of black behaviour.

Yet, while such limitations need to be acknowledged, by following Raymond Carr's injunction to 'quarry in the outworks' of historical archives, this book has been based on a rich store of new material. Much of the most illuminating source material comes from British military collections which have never been used before; indeed, these manuscript papers, along with contemporary printed material, provide evidence on topics of central concern to social historians, such as peasant activity, or the ideological resources of tenants on scattered settler farms. While military history should preferably be left to military historians, the same surely cannot be said for its 'social' sources: these can serve a far wider historical purpose, and serve it very profitably. Here I would endorse Michael Howard's insistence that for historians, 'wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are, as Marxist military analysts quite rightly insist, conflicts of *societies*, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them'.⁸ Colonial administrative records have also been of considerable value. Scarcely a district magistrate's archive is without some relevant material, however scrappy, and I have tried to sample these collections as widely as possible. Among collections of unofficial papers, missionary archives provided useful data on labour and other activity in the countryside. Newspapers and journals have been another essential source. On the other hand, the proportion of relevant available material

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written by the colony's educated African and Coloured elites is not large; there are hardly any contemporary printed sources apart from the newspapers, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, *Izwi Labantu* and the *South African Spectator*. In view of this, and of the book's central focus on 'popular' rather than petty-bourgeois class experience, a range of manuscript letters, statements, formal affidavits and depositions all carry considerable weight in the text. Many of these surface in police and army intelligence files, and appear in translation in the voluminous papers concerned with treason investigations. Others are to be found scattered in correspondence papers, as the disclosures of informers or as demands and grievances lodged with military officers and district officials. These documents are evidently the *only* literate expression of labourers and peasants which has survived the war. As their statements and affidavits throw important light on particular situations and individuals, I have tried wherever possible and appropriate to cite this material in the text. I have done the same with the small cluster of oral sources collected for this book.

In the course of research and writing I have incurred many obligations and in acknowledging them I naturally take full responsibility for the result. This book originated as a doctoral thesis for the University of Cambridge. Although its shape, tone and texture have since altered somewhat, my first considerable debt is undoubtedly to my supervisor and friend, John Lonsdale, who has long been generous with his time and thought. I owe him a special note of gratitude for his guidance and constructive advice and criticisms both regarding the thesis and its preparation for publication in book form. As a postgraduate student I was supported financially through the generosity of the Master and Fellows of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, who elected me into a Gonville Research Studentship; and I received some additional help with travel monies from the managers of the Smuts Memorial Fund for Commonwealth Studies in the University of Cambridge, and from the Trustees of the Ernest Oppenheimer Memorial Trust in Johannesburg, South Africa. For allowing me time off from employment as a research assistant several years ago, in order to work on this topic, I am also grateful to Francis Wilson of the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) in the School of Economics of the University of Cape Town.

I also profited from having an opportunity to present material from this study to seminars or conference workshops at the Universities of Cambridge, London, York, Oxford and Cape Town, and at Yale University. To those who offered helpful advice and challenging criticism, I wish to record my thanks. The original thesis was examined by Professor Shula Marks and Professor D. K. Fieldhouse and I am grateful to them for their suggestions and corrections. Thanks are also due to the archivists and librarians of various record offices, libraries and museums who have given me both assistance and hospitality; Major W. H. Mahon of the Irish Guards and the staff of the reading room in the National Army Museum deserve special mention for going out of their way to aid me in gaining access to deposits of rarely examined military records. Barbara Conradie, formerly of the Cape Archives, must also be thanked for being particularly helpful. I am also grateful to Mrs Sue Wright, Mrs Veronica Tregurtha and, most especially, Mrs Gill Curling, who typed portions of the manuscript with care and good humour. Leonie Twentyman-Jones compiled the index.

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One of the pleasures of writing is surely the opportunity to record in a public place one's debts to those who have offered essential encouragement, interest, advice and support over some years of dabbling in both the subject and the discipline. These individuals are as wide ranging as the debts. While I cannot hope to record everyone, I wish to acknowledge Ian Phimister, Colin Bundy, Vivian Bickford-Smith, Patrick Harries, Christopher Saunders, Nigel Penn, Albert Grundlingh, Peter Warwick, Andre Odendaal, Stanley Trapido, Charles van Onselen, Brian Willan, Jan Fredrickson, Shamil Jeppie, Kitty Kiernan, Linda Chisholm, Tessa Fairbairn, Stephen Watson, William Beinart, Taffy Shearing, Gary Mead, Laurie Jaffe and Navlika Ramjee. I should also like to acknowledge Bernard Porter and the late Alan Lee, who helped to ensure that I withered into history rather than literary studies. At Cambridge University Press, Jessica Kuper has been a friendly and supportive editor and Wendy Guise and Jean Field have my appreciation. And finally, to Ann and Leah in particular, I owe a special tribute. Though they did no proofreading, they helped, among other things, to persuade me that history is too important to be left to professional historians.

I would like to offer one personal concluding reflection or, probably more accurately, admission. Born in Cape Town in the early 1950s, I have spent most of my years here experiencing, and recoiling from, the utter ghastliness of a Nationalist South Africa, with its reliance upon an appalling combination of authoritarianism, lunacy and mediocrity. I suppose that such a personal formation leaves a mark on one's work. It has probably affected the manner of this book's deeply felt historical obsessions. It is, in consequence, undoubtedly longer on moral economy than on political economy; it has been my good fortune to work in a Department of Economic History which accommodates both concerns. I suppose that in ways that one may not ordinarily find easy to acknowledge, some of the threads which run through *Abraham Esau's War* make up history as an imaginative survival. To Ian Phimister a candid and generous perception of this is due; to me the consequential errors and deficiencies.

Acknowledgements

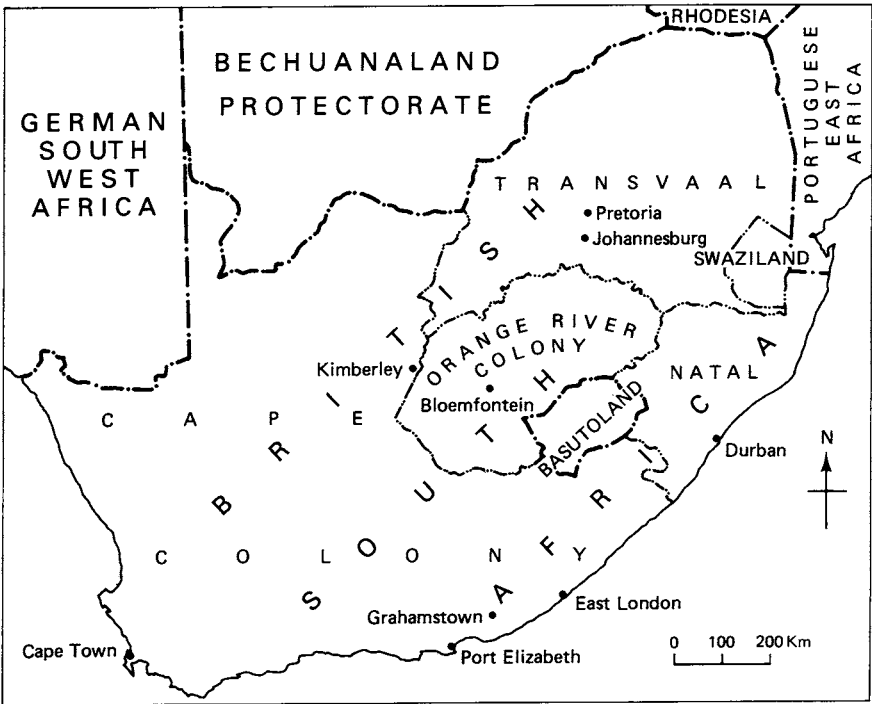
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Abbreviations

ACG	Archives of the Coldstream Guards
Admr	Administrator
Ag	Acting
AG	Attorney General, Cape Colony
AGG	Archives of the Grenadier Guards
Agt	Agent
AIG	Archives of the Irish Guards
CA	Cape Archives: a full list of abbreviations of individual manuscript series appears in the bibliography
<i>Cape Hansard</i>	Cape Colony, <i>Legislative Assembly Debates, Hansard, 1899–1902</i>
<i>CBBNA</i>	<i>Cape Blue Books on Native Affairs</i>
CC	Civil Commissioner
CDO	Chief Detective Officer
CM	Chief Magistrate
Cmdt	Commandant
CO	Colonial Office
conf.	confidential
Const.	Constable
desp.	despatches
encl.	enclosure
IOL	India Office Library
JP	Justice of the Peace
LHC	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, University of London
LMS	London Missionary Society
MCA	Methodist Church Archives
MMPUS	Murray Parker, Ursula Scott Collections, UCTL
MMS	(Wesleyan) Methodist Missionary Society
NA	Native Affairs Department, Cape Colony
NAM	National Army Museum
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
NMM	National Maritime Museum

Abbreviations

OC	Officer Commanding
P/MMS	Primitive Methodist Missionary Society
PRO	Public Record Office
RAMC	Royal Army Medical College
RFA	Royal Field Artillery
RHF	Royal Highland Fusiliers
RM	Resident Magistrate
RO	Regimental Orders
RSR	Royal Sussex Regiment
SAL	South African Public Library
SGR	Scots Guards Records
SLD	Secretary to the Law Department, Cape Colony
SM	Special Magistrate
SNA	Secretary for Native Affairs, Cape Colony
SO	Staff Officer
Spl	Special
tel.	telegram
UCTL	J. W. Jagger Library, University of Cape Town
UFCS	United Free Church of Scotland
USPG	United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
WCL	Westfield College Library, University of London
WO	War Office
WSCRO	West Sussex County Record Office, Chichester



Map 1 South Africa. Compiled by F. Stemmet (1982), from *British South Africa* (Maskew Miller, Cape Town, 1905).