

PAULA KREBS' *GENDER, RACE, AND THE WRITING OF EMPIRE*: Mapping the Battle for Imperial Influence

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Book Information: Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire:
Public Discourse and the Boer War. *Paula M. Krebs*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 221 pp.

According to Paula M. Krebs, “Mafeking Night made jingoism safe for the middle classes by blurring the distinction between jingoism, which had been seen as working-class over-enthusiasm for the empire, and patriotism, that middle-class virtue of support for one’s country against foreign opposition.”¹ Krebs’ description of the night of May 18, 1900, encapsulates her overarching focus on British society: the desire to understand the British imperial message. In her book *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War*, Krebs challenges preconceived notions of widespread pro-imperial support in Britain during the Boer War. A scholar whose ambition is matched by her use of contemporary sources, Krebs argues that key entities, such as the press and literary figures, constantly battled for influence over the British public’s understanding of the British Empire.

In six thematically organized chapters, Krebs lays out the battle for imperial influence in London, South African and British literature, the British press, Victorian gender ideology, and the British concentration camps. Starting with the spontaneity of the celebration following the victory at Mafeking, Krebs dissects Britain’s support for its own imperial effort in the fight against the Boers, noting press writings and private correspondence that shed doubt on the state of the nation. This continues seamlessly into a multi-chapter discussion of the concentration camps built by the British army to “house” Boer women and children. Here, she analyzes the biases of London’s major newspapers and their desire to influence public opinion and the role of individual women and gender in the fight for the soul of the war in the press and beyond. Krebs finishes her book by examining literature of the war from pro-Boer and pro-British authors, detailing how the British home population read about a land, a situation, another white culture, and a war without ever setting sight on South Africa. Public opinion, like imperialism, was as imagined as it was real.

Paula Krebs’ work on Britain, the Boer War, and the British public offers an astoundingly deep study on the cultural battle that one conflict produced. If one thing is sure by the end of the book, it is that the Boer War was far more consequential for British imperialism and views of South Africa than was previously known. Most important are the primary sources Krebs uses, such as H. Rider Haggard’s introduction of Rudyard Kipling at the Anglo-African Writer’s Club, as they include the raw emotion and rhetoric of the imperial age that was used from literary figures to newspapers to capture the public’s attention and, more importantly, support.² These sources not only offer proper context to the reader, but they allow Krebs’ cultural study to stand out in the field and offer readers the opportunity to understand more deeply what was influencing the British public’s views of a conflict on the far end of

¹ Paula M. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

² Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 151.

another continent. Further distinguishing Krebs' work is the inclusion of gender roles and dynamics into her research, combining the more often discussed themes of race and empire with such things like Emily Hobhouse's report on British internment camps or Olive Schreiner's non-fiction essays on Boer-British racial dynamics, of which the former became crucial to the anti-war press's efforts in London.³ Krebs' book successfully intertwines gender, race, and literature with the fight over imperialism within Britain while expanding insight into the era through the usage of a modern historical lens.

While Krebs' choice of sources is certainly what sets her book apart, it is her narrow focus that may diminish the scholarly contribution she offers to the field. By focusing only on the Boer War, the importance of her cultural analysis remains confined to a consequential yet short period of British imperial history, both in the context of the globe and British South Africa. Notably, Krebs does not offer insight into how other British settler colonies, such as Canada or Australia, viewed the conflict and the strength of the British imperial message, as well as the gender and racial discourse within it. Such sources could allow for a slightly more expansive analysis of the success and failings of what the British Empire stood for around the turn of the century. Furthermore, while not indispensable, a final chapter concluding the book and situating the argument in a broader imperial context and within the longer history of South Africa could also widen the scope and audience of Krebs' book immensely. Even still, Krebs' pointed focus, immense detail, and logical analysis allows for readers to envision historical connections that are not themselves written.

I reviewed *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire* for my HIST495 Introduction to Historical Interpretation course—the first course in Emory University's Honors History track through which students formulate their thesis ideas and submit a final proposal for a senior honors thesis paper to the department. In terms of the book's pedagogical value, the work itself was highly conducive to our class discussion on how historians are expected to contribute to their own fields in a variety of ways, such as with book reviews, and how past research and historical arguments play into current historiography, including undergraduate thesis proposals. While each student chose their own book to review, our analysis and reflection of these reviews revealed the importance of specific skills to the historical discipline, such as comprehension and synthesis. Reviewing Krebs' work allowed me to hone these skills by attempting to offer a worthy summary of Krebs' work while still providing readers a light but naturally flowing historiographical argument on the book itself.

In terms of my personal scholarly growth, evaluating Krebs' work provided me with my first glimpse into the modern historiography of the Second Boer War and the shaky relationship that British imperialism had with racial thinking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beyond merely contributing to my historical knowledge on this subject, Krebs' work and research has since become highly influential to my own honors thesis that deals with British imperial understandings and depictions of the Zulu and the Boers in the British metropole. Whereas Krebs exposes British inconsistencies in gender and racial thinking during the Boer War, my thesis is aimed at building on her work on race and empire by analyzing and comparing how imperial Britain viewed black and white imperial enemies in two separate conflicts connected by time period and geography in South Africa.

Overall, Paula Krebs' cultural analysis stands out in that it goes beyond the military conflict of the Boer War and, instead, uses the clash to analyze the culture of the imperial society fighting the war. Her writing style is both coherent and creative,

³ Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 32, 111.

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weaving sources and analysis together into an informative but also captivating read. This book is useful for scholars and readers who are interested in intersections of race and gender at the height of the late imperial and Victorian age, especially so if one also enjoys British, Boer, or South African history. In her work, Krebs blurs no distinctions, and her main message is distinct from beginning to end: the justification for British imperialism was neither uncontested nor clearly defined.