

Building a Nation of Readers? Women's Organizations and the Politics of Reading in South Africa, 1900-1914

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The role of women in promoting ideas of empire, nation and ethnicity in early-twentieth century South Africa is receiving increasing attention. Recent research accords a more prominent position, for example, to women in the articulation and development of British loyalism and Afrikaner nationalism during and after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).¹ Women exploited opportunities and spaces both in England and South Africa to assert stronger roles for themselves in post-war public affairs. These efforts were framed by patriarchal, colonial, moral, racial and ideological contexts, and revealed interesting tensions and contradictions involving notions of gender, race, social class and nation-building. Gaitskell illustrates the complex interplay of some of these dynamics in her analysis of the early history of South Africa's suffrage organization. Whereas the first phase of the female suffrage struggle was characterised as an empire-wide movement and largely excluded Dutch-Afrikaans-speaking women, she argues that matters changed considerably after the First World War (1914-1918), when Afrikaans-speaking women themselves also sought enfranchisement.²

The early adversarial stances adopted by English and Dutch-Afrikaans-speaking women towards each other may be understood in the context of the welfare and nation-building projects of each group in the wake of the devastating Anglo-Boer War. For Dutch-Afrikaans-speaking women, ethnic solidarity outweighed gender solidarity, and for English-speaking women imperial bonds were of primary importance. In several charitable and welfare organizations these allegiances influenced their work, and language became a powerful tool for nation-building and mobilising wider support. Both groups recognised the value of education and especially the influence of the reading of history by children in a nation-building project. Early reading initiatives therefore manifested the cultural politics of English and Dutch-Afrikaans women's organizations. These women's organizations and their reading initiatives became entangled with competing views of the "new" South African nation. Imperial, colonial, republican and ethnic ideas of the nation shaped their outlooks. Each organization imagined and attempted to build a different "nation of readers".

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1 H. Bradford, "Regendering Afrikanerdom: The 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War", in I. Blom and K. Hagemann (eds), *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth-century* (Berg, Oxford, 2000); J. Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (Leicester University Press, London, 2000); M. du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, March 2003, pp 155-76; L. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes: The Afrikaner Nationalist Women's Parties, 1915-1931", *South African Historical Journal*, 40, May 1999, pp 51-73.

2 D. Gaitskell, "The Imperial Tie: Obstacle or Asset for South Africa's Women Suffragists before 1930?", *South African Historical Journal*, 47, November 2002 (the cover indicates October 2002), pp 1-23.

In this article, some of the complexities of the cultural politics of selected English and Dutch-Afrikaans women's organizations will be explored by focusing on their efforts to use reading for nation-building. There are several sceptical views of putative links between reading and national or ethnic identity. Hofmeyr, for example, pointed out that popular responses to efforts to "capture" audiences for Afrikaans literary materials produced in the early decades of the twentieth century, were not an unqualified success. As readers, Dutch-Afrikaans women and men saw themselves as "Jo'burgers, Kapenaars (Capetonians), lovers, workers, mothers" and so on, albeit underpinned by a "sediment of 'Afrikanerness' which had settled in many households".³ A growing number of recent case studies, moreover, demonstrate the inventive use and "socially-embedded" nature of reading and writing when adopted in specific spatial and historical settings. These situated practices destabilise received views of the value of literacy acquisition.⁴ In addition, therefore, to questions of who reads and what is read, there are questions of the who, where and how of producing reading materials, as well as the who and how of providing and distributing them.

Stronger views question the value of nation-building itself as a political project, and reject its application to class formation or other attempts at group solidarity.⁵ Edward Said, for example, recently issued a severe caution to South African educators on reading and nation-building. "It would be the rankest betrayal of the educational mission", he stated, "if the reading of books was in some way viewed as tantamount to smuggling a 'corrected' or 'properly restored' sense of the new national identity."⁶ He argued that plenty opportunities exist elsewhere in society for nation-building activities. Reading, according to Said, should be trained towards "an awakened understanding" and the "highest levels of imagination and originality", rather than nation-building.⁷

However, from about 1900 to 1914, women's organizations began to shape "nations of readers" by providing books and magazines to "public libraries"⁸, school libraries, reading unions and reading circles. They may not have acted directly on behalf of the state or the church, but their voluntary reading initiatives were certainly encouraged

3 I Hofmeyr, "Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924", in S Marks and S Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-century South Africa*, (Longman, New York, 1987), p 115

4 See for example G Cavallo and R Chartier, (eds), *A History of Reading in the West* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1999); P Harries, "Missionaries, Marxists and Magic: Power and the Politics of Literacy in South-East Africa", *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, 27, 3, September 2001, pp 405-27

5 For critiques of nation-building, see H Giliomee, "One Nation, Many Problems: Who's Stumbling on the Road to a Common Nationhood", *Democracy in Action: Monthly Newsletter of the Institute for a Democratic Alternative (IDASA) for South Africa*, August 1989, p 7; J Degenaar, "Nation-building an Example of Outdated Thinking?", *Democracy in Action*, June/July 1990, pp 8-10; N Alexander, "The State of Nation-building in the New South Africa", *Pretex: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, 2001, pp 83-91

6 E W Said, Unpublished paper presented at the Values, Education and Democracy in the C21 Conference, 22 March 2001, Cape Town; see E W Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education", *Pretex: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, 2001, p 15

7 E W Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education", *Pretex: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, 2001, p 17

8 Although called public libraries, the South African model was that of the subscription library, with a restricted membership up to the early-twentieth century. From 1874 onward, a state subsidy required free public access to books as a condition, but this was not enforced

by these powerful institutions. Through their education, book or literature committees, they involved themselves especially with the supply and quality of reading fare, and the regulation of reading itself. These organizations were, moreover, concerned with the kind of history books available and with the development of a national identity. In brief, they assigned a nation-building role to reading.

Elizabeth Van Heyningen and Pat Merrett point out that in the immediate post-war era there was a “flowering of women’s organizations” throughout South Africa.⁹ Among such organizations concerned with education, welfare or reading between 1900 and 1914, were the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, the “Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging” (Afrikaans Christian Women’s Association), the “Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie” (South African Women’s Federation), the South African Home Reading Union, the Victoria League and the Victoria League of South Africa.¹⁰ The emphasis here falls more strongly on providers of reading material than readers themselves. The constitutions, official and unofficial statements on policy, minutes of meetings and accounts of the actual services of these organizations will be analysed. The dearth of sources and the difficulty of tracing those that reveal reader responses for this period limit a fuller assessment of the impact and value of these services. The views and official reports of librarians, education officials such as Superintendent General and school inspectors, and random letters will, however, be identified to provide some insight in this regard.¹¹

Reading initiatives were neither the sole purpose for the existence of these women’s organizations, nor their primary activity. They were also not the only groups supplying reading materials and forming reading circles or libraries at the time.¹² Nonetheless, in all instances a concern with reading was either written into the first policy documents or featured in the earliest meetings of these women’s organizations. It will become clear that the reading initiatives became part of how they saw and represented themselves, and were key to the overall purpose and programme of their activities.

Reading and ‘Loyalism’

The Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa was launched in March 1900 with the motto “For King and Empire”, to “maintain and foster the spirit of loyalty to the

9 E van Heyningen and P Merrett, “‘The Healing Touch’: The Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, 1900-1912”, *South African Historical Journal*, 47, November 2002, p 44

10 The South African Home Reading Union and the Victoria League of South Africa admitted males, but they were still predominantly women’s organizations. For a list of the women’s organizations in existence at the time, see E. Glanville (ed), *The South African Almanack and Reference Book, 1911-1912* (Argus, Cape Town, 1911), pp 766-769. Black women’s organisations like the Indian Women’s Association (1908) and the Native and Coloured Women of the Province of the Orange Free State (1912), organized themselves primarily to protest against a residence licence tax and pass laws respectively – see M J Daymond *et al* (ed), *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2003), pp 155-156, 158-161

11 There are very few useful studies in South Africa in general that investigate the response of readers, but see for example E French, *The Reading World of Black Workers* (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1989); S Nuttall, “Reading in the Lives and Writing of Black South African Women”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 1, March 1994, pp 85-99

12 For an elite men’s social and reading club, see “The United Club at Fordsburg”, *The Star*, 31 August 1906, p 4. For a working men’s library, see “New Jewish Club for Working Men”, *The Star*, 8 October 1906

Queen and fidelity of the British Empire".¹³ Contrary to its description as non-political organization, the Guild was committed to maintaining the Cape Colony as part of the British Empire and promoting its supremacy. The close association of its *grandes dames* with Sir Alfred Milner (1854-1925), the British High Commissioner for all four colonies, attests to the Guild's strong imperial outlook. One of its founders, Dorothea Fairbridge (1862-1931) who was also described as a nation-builder, came strongly under his influence. There was even a rumour that she had had an affair with Milner. Another founder member, Lady Violet Cecil (1870-1958), subsequently married Milner in 1921. The Guild brought together loyalist English and Cape Dutch women and was established at a point in the war when British victory seemed only a remote possibility. It provided a firmer arrangement for loyalist South African women to rally around the British forces, strengthen the ties of Empire, and consolidate their ongoing relief efforts.¹⁴ Its imperialist political orientation was confirmed in its sub-title, "Daughters of the Empire".

The Guild spread rapidly throughout the Cape Colony and by July 1900 there were already branches in 42 towns and villages with over 3 000 members. Branches also emerged in Natal – in Pietermaritzburg on 15 November 1900 and in Durban on 27 November 1900. In the Transvaal, Guild branches only appeared in mid-1901, with the first in Johannesburg on 6 May 1901 and in Pretoria on 28 May 1901. Branches soon followed in Barberton, Krugersdorp and others. By the end of 1903 there were 18 branches with 1 105 members in the Transvaal.¹⁵ The Guild became strongly involved in the work of tending war graves and beautifying cemeteries. This was difficult and tiring work as the war moved into the guerilla phase after June 1900, and graves became far more widely scattered.¹⁶

Van Heyningen and Merrett contend that in imperial terms this was the Guild's most significant contribution. But while they were less public, its reading initiatives were arguably more far-reaching in promoting imperial ideas. This resulted from the Guild's connections with other British-based organizations, and with prominent South African political leaders and civil servants who were interested in reading. The Guild's own reading concerns were put on a firmer footing in 1903. Its Central Literature Committee reported that a request had been received from Miss Katherine Pease in January of that same year, suggesting that the Guild should give its support to the National Home Reading Union. This organization originated in London in 1889, and had for several years already had members and reading circles in

13 M P Atteridge, *A Short History of the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa* (Pretoria, s a), p 3
Loyalty to Great Britain was also openly shown by black South Africans, but received a very different response. Addresses of Loyalty, for example, were presented by coloureds to Joseph Chamberlain in Cape Town in February 1903, and to Alfred Milner in Johannesburg in July 1903 – see R E van der Ross, *The Rise and Decline of Apartheid: A Study of Political Movements among the Coloured People of South Africa, 1880-1985* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1986), pp 23-24. See also A Odendaal, *Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1984), pp 31-33

14 E van Heyningen and P Merrett, "'The Healing Touch': The Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, 1900-1912", *South African Historical Journal*, 47, November 2002, p 27; T Gutsche, *No Ordinary Woman: The Life and Times of Florence Phillips* (H Timmins, Cape Town, 1966), p 194

15 Johannesburg Public Library, Johannesburg: Strange Collection. File MSA/741 and 742, Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa (Transvaal Division), *Second Annual Report, 1901-1903*, (s1 Johannesburg, 1904), p 28

16 E van Heyningen and P Merrett, "'The Healing Touch': The Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, 1900-1912", *South African Historical Journal*, 47, November 2002, p 31

South Africa.¹⁷ The National Home Reading Union was itself patterned closely after the example of the Chautauqua Movement in the United States. Founded in New York State in 1871 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Reading Circle eventually grew to a membership of 100 000 workmen, farmers, teachers and housewives who read a course of prescribed books over a period of four years.¹⁸

The National Home Reading Union, which was the Chautauqua movement's British replication, had a mass appeal and its reach into the British colonies was spurred on by local English women's organizations. The aims of the National Home Reading Union were to:

- guide readers of all ages in the choice of books;
- direct and assist self-education;
- group readers where possible in circles for mutual help and interest; and
- unite readers as members in a great reading guild.¹⁹

It advocated "systematic guided reading", and aimed its services in Great Britain especially at the working classes who, it feared, were reading harmful and "dangerous" literature, especially cheaply available fiction, comics and newspapers. Some admirers saw the Union as being able to produce "a nation of readers of the best books".²⁰ The Union's basic unit of activity was the local reading circle, consisting of at least five members. It chose which of the courses set by the Union it would follow. Circles would meet fortnightly or monthly at members' houses, or in a public library or schoolroom, and work under a voluntary leader who would direct the meeting, lead the discussion on the chosen books, collect subscription fees and distribute copies of the Union's monthly magazine. There were three courses, namely the General, Artisan's and Young People's Courses. Upon successful completion of these courses, certificates were issued to all members of the circle.

Miss Pease's request marked the beginning of a stronger commitment by the Guild to "patriotic" educational work. By early February 1903, with the war over, the Guild's character was changing. In its aim to participate in the reconstruction of South Africa, it was eager to build a new nation that would take its place in the great "Federation of

17 In the mid-nineteenth century there had already emerged a number of widely scattered and sporadic reading and study circles attached to churches, literary and scientific societies. For a broad overview, see M H van der Merwe, "Voorkoms van Leesgroepe in Suid-Afrika en Teorie oor die Ontstaan van die Moderne Leeskring", *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, 57, 4, Desember 1989, pp 383-392

18 T. Morrison, *Chautauqua: A Centre for Education, Religion and the Arts in America*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974) This movement was already active in Wellington in the Cape Colony in 1885 or 1886 – see J J Ross, *De Chautauqua Lees en Studie Cirkel* (N P B, Kaapstad, 1916), p 22; J J Ross, "Leesvereniginge", in E E Van Rooyen, *Populair-Wetenskaplike Leesboek: in Ses Dele in Afrikaans II* (De Nationale Pers, Kaapstad, 1919), pp 201-205. Although women were admitted as members, this reading initiative was confined mostly to the Free State and relied on the energies of its secretary Reverend J J Ross, and a handful of people. Afrikaners regarded its foreign-sounding name as problematic, and it experienced several practical problems such as a lack of support, finding suitable books, and having to place orders with Dutch publishers. It did not appear to survive beyond its original supporters.

19 National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (hereafter NASA): File CS/868/15260, National Home Reading Union, 1908

20 J E Phythian, "Librarian and Reader", *Library Association Record*, 2, 1900, p 306

the Empire". Reading, in the reconstruction process, would be tied closely to this nation-building exercise. The Guild referred to its own constitution to justify the necessity of this task and its link with the National Home Reading Union. It argued that through the Union's teaching of English history and literature, the Guild fulfilled a constitutional mandate to "make the people of South Africa proud of their membership of the great British Empire".²¹ To demonstrate its solidarity with the Federal idea, the Guild restructured itself along federal lines at its annual conference of 1903. It established a Federal Council and a Federal Executive with representatives from the four colonies.²²

The concern with reading, especially the kind of history books used to teach South African schoolchildren, had however already bothered the loyal "nation-builder" Dorothea Fairbridge much earlier. In a conversation with Lady Edith Lyttelton (1860-1948) during 1900, Fairbridge highlighted the Guild's work in schools where, she claimed, "the most atrocious lies' were being taught by Boer teachers".²³ It may not have been coincidental that in that same year Milner had asked Sir George Pretzman in the Free State what history was being taught in schools. He suspected that "studious youth' are brought up almost exclusively on Majuba, with a little Jameson thrown in as a seasoning". He subsequently commissioned the writing of *The story of the world* by B. Synge as a "corrective measure".²⁴ "Not half enough attention has been paid to school reading books", Milner complained later that same year in a letter to Major Hanbury Williams. He claimed that "To get this right would be the greatest political achievement conceivable".²⁵

Dorothea Fairbridge's allegation about lies by "Boer" teachers probably referred to the work of the Christian National Education (CNE) schools started in the concentration camps, in response to the British camp schools. But it is more interesting to note that someone who was also concerned about school history books, and who would later become President of the "Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging" (Afrikaans Christian Women's Association) was then struggling to find a teaching post in the Cape Colony. In July 1900, M.E. Rothman (1875-1975) had returned from the Transvaal to her home in Swellendam, where she increasingly questioned British loyalism. She and her sister had had a confrontation with Scottish-born Doctor Thomas Muir, the Superintendent General of Education in the Cape Colony, after she had been turned down for a job. When she took another job at a nearby private school that received a state subsidy, she had to leave after only one term of teaching. Muir had stopped the state subsidy to the specific school because of her presence there. He had also personally dismissed Rothman's sister for "insubordination" when she and a colleague tried to add a thirteen volume Dutch-language history of South Africa that they had bought from money raised at a

21 "Women's Interests", *Cape Times*, 6 July 1906

22 Unisa Archives, Pretoria (hereafter UA): Wagener Collection, Guild of Loyal Women (Cape Colony), General Report for 1903, p 22

23 Cited in J Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (Leicester University Press, London, 2000), p 90 It is noteworthy that Dorothea Fairbridge also subsequently published a history of South Africa with a sympathetic treatment of Milner's work – D Fairbridge, *A History of South Africa*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1918)

24 See J Ploeger, "Onderwys en Onderwysbeleid in die Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek onder Ds S J du Toit en Dr N Mansvelt (1881-1900)", in C Beyers et al (eds), *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 15, 1 (Cape Times, Cape Town, 1952), p 199 (footnote 3)

25 C Headlam, (ed), *The Milner Papers* (Cassell, London, 1933), pp 242-244

school-concert to the school library. Soon thereafter, Rothman introduced her own “vaderlandsgeskiedenis” at a private school.²⁶ Muir, moreover, wholeheartedly supported the National Home Reading Union and the Guild’s reading initiatives. In this way, the school libraries in the Cape Colony were filled with books supplied, among others, by the Guild and the National Home Reading Union. During Muir’s term as Superintendent General of Education of the Cape Colony (1892-1915), school libraries increased from 22 in 1892 to 2 235 in 1914. By 1910 there were also 93 “native” and mission schools that had school libraries. This remarkable expansion of school libraries was, however, tainted by Muir’s pro-English attitude and general neglect and lack of sensitivity regarding the language question. His belief that children should acquire “a taste for wholesome and useful reading” really meant books predominantly in English and reflecting English cultural life.²⁷

Doctor Muir’s Education Department produced a pamphlet on school libraries in 1903 which contained three lists of a hundred books each suited to the different types of public schools at that time. Very valuable reference works like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were added to some school library collections alongside multiple copies of, for example, the English publisher Blackie’s *Home and Colonial Library*. In the lists, books suited to “girls” and “younger scholars” were distinguished by a special mark. There was almost nothing on South Africa or by South African authors. Some interesting titles included *How England saved Europe*, *Deeds that won the Empire* and volumes on English heroes, songs and a history of the English people.²⁸

Muir and the Guild’s endorsement of the National Home Reading Union led to reading circles being established and their courses being circulated to several Guild branches.²⁹ In quick succession there were circles of the National Home Reading Union in Cape Town, De Aar, Griqualand West, Griquatown, George, Humansdorp, Molteno, Petrusville, Port Elizabeth, Sterkstroom, Queenstown, Cradock and the Cape Peninsula in 1903. More followed in several other towns.³⁰

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- 26 M E Rothman, *My Beskeie Deel: n Outobiografiese Vertelling* (Tafelberg Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1972), pp 134-136, 152-154 The appointment of Thomas Muir was strongly influenced by Prime Minister Cecil John Rhodes, who would not entrust the job to a colonial South African – H M Daleboudt, “Sir Thomas Muir en die Onderwys in Kaapland tydens sy Bestuur as Superintendent-Generaal van Onderwys, 1892-1915”, D Ed tesis, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 1942, pp 35-39
- 27 D F Joubert, “Die Ontwikkeling van die Onderwysstelsel in die Kaapkolonie onder die Bestuur van Dr Thomas Muir (tot 1910), met n Krities-historiese Inleiding”, B Ed skripsie, Universiteit van Kaapstad, 1932, pp 100-181
- 28 UA: Wagener Collection, Department of Public Education, Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, *School Libraries*, Pamphlet 18 (Cape Times, Cape Town, 1903) The first organized effort to establish school libraries in the Cape Colony dates back to 1893 For an account of how the growing displacement of “Britishness” by “Englishness” at the turn of the twentieth century was reflected in English school reading books, see S Heathorn, “‘Let Us Remember that We, too, are English’: Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books”, *Victorian Studies*, 38, 3, Spring 1995, pp 396-427
- 29 For a recent overview of the history and work of the National Home Reading Union, see R Snape, “The National Home Reading Union”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 7, 1, Spring 2002, pp 86-110
- 30 For reports of the activities of branches, see Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town (hereafter CA): Guild of Loyal Women Collection, File A/2065, *Federal Leaflet*, January 1906, pp 7-8, 20-23 I am thankful to Elizabeth van Heyningen for these and other references in the Cape Archives Depot

Some of these circles engaged themselves with the development of school and children's libraries.³¹ National Home Reading Union circles were also envisaged as the salvation of local "public libraries". Librarians who had arrived in South Africa from Great Britain brought these reading and library practices with them and quickly supported the work of the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa and the National Home Reading Union. The Guild, in its turn, extended the work of the National Home Reading Union and of libraries into small rural towns. In this way "remote districts" like Namaqualand, Griqualand East, Libode and Umtata awoke to the use of books and the value of reading during 1903.³² The National Home Reading Union later sought to extend its reach directly into South African schools by requesting that education authorities should assist teachers to subscribe to the Union. In this way, reading circles of schoolchildren could be formed. The request was, however, not supported.³³

Reading and "a knowledge of English history and life"

Another energetic supplier of reading material to South African readers that was strongly driven by an imperialist agenda was the Literature/Book Committee of the Victoria League. The Victoria League was founded in London on 2 April 1901, and had close links with the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa. It is claimed that the Guild provided not only the political stimulus for the League's founding but also its blueprint, as well as important colonial contacts.³⁴ The Victoria League was more aristocratic in character than the middle-class Guild but the two organizations enjoyed cordial relations and cooperated effectively. The League's provision of reading material was couched in its imperialist education programme. The core components of its message were "patriotism, belief in racial hierarchy, respect for the monarchy, Christianity and the armed services, and admiration for the past and present British 'heroes' who exemplified these values".³⁵

Its educational and reading concerns were therefore high priorities, and it is not surprising that at its inaugural meeting, the League's founder, Lady Violet Cecil, identified the need for wholesome political literature and good history textbooks for schools in South Africa.³⁶ As the Anglo-Boer War ended, the League regarded it as its patriotic duty to develop English-language school libraries in South Africa. In 1903, it organized to send English literature to these schools to promote "a knowledge of English history and life". The wife of the Lieutenant-Governor of the Transvaal, Lady Lawley, was instrumental in effecting the League's aims through the Transvaal Division of the Guild to supply school libraries with books and money. The system

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- 31 CA: Guild of Loyal Women (Cape Colony), *General Report for 1903*, pp 43-53 By 1984 there was still a branch of the National Home Reading Union in East London - S Dickie, "A History of the National Home Reading Union", *The Coelacanth*, 32, 1, June 1994, pp 10-13
- 32 B L Dyer, "Libraries for Scantily Populated Districts", *Report of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science: Third Meeting, Johannesburg, 1905 [and] Fourth Meeting, Kimberley, 1906* (The Association, Cape Town, 1907), p 527; B L Dyer, *The Public Library Systems of Great Britain, America and South Africa* (s1, Kimberley, 1903), pp 34-36
- 33 NASA: File CS/868/15260, Correspondence between AM Read, Secretary of the National Home Reading Union and the Acting Secretary, Education Department in 1908 A very useful general prospectus of the National Home Reading Union and copies of its magazine can also be found in this file
- 34 E Riedi, "Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire: The Victoria League, 1901-1914", *The Historical Journal*, 45, 3, 2002, p 575
- 35 J Bush, *Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power* (Leicester University Press, London, 2000), p 126
- 36 V Milner, *My Picture Gallery* (Murray, London, 1951), p 237

would be operated through the school-inspectors and supplies of suitable books sent to Government schools, notably those in the country districts.³⁷

This arrangement fitted in well with Milner's Anglicisation policy, and it took aim at Dutch-Afrikaans children by getting them to look outwards beyond South Africa, and to focus preferably on England. One Transvaal school-inspector, for example, reported that "The illustrated papers are most keenly appreciated by the Boer children, and will prove very valuable in making them familiar with other scenes and phases of life outside South Africa".³⁸ Milner's acting Director of Education, E.B. Sargent, instilled into teachers the "greatness of the English Imperial idea".³⁹ The teachers, in their turn, set about the task of indoctrination through history lessons and "guided" reading. From 1904 to 1915, the League supplied over 400 cases of books, usually each containing about 200 books and magazines, to several "public" and school libraries around South Africa.⁴⁰ In many instances the League cooperated with the Guild, the National Home Reading Union and "public libraries" in an imperial network to provide reading materials and encourage reading activities.⁴¹ Regular follow-up letters from the League ensured that the books actually reached their destinations.⁴² These cases reached small towns like Darling in the Cape and Rustenburg in the Transvaal.

The Victoria League also organized a system of travelling libraries, often called the "Markham Libraries" after Lady Violet Markham (1872-1959), who was also an important member of the League. These comprised boxes of books that were transported across the country by railway, and were primarily intended for female readers.⁴³ The level of commitment by the League to this system is apparent from its relentless correspondence regarding a case of books that went missing in the Transvaal. Between 20 November 1905 and 21 May 1906, several letters were exchanged between the League's Honorary Secretary, Mabel Seymour, and various officials in South Africa, and between the officials themselves in an effort to locate the missing case of books. It was intended for the Ermelo congregation of the South African Church Railway Mission⁴⁴ (an Anglican mission for whites), and eventually turned up at the Wonderfontein railway station, much to the delight of the clergyman

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- 37 Johannesburg Public Library, Johannesburg: Strange Collection, File MSA/741 and 742, "*Guild of Loyal Women, (Transvaal Division)*", pp 36-37
- 38 Cited in E. Riedi, "Women, Gender, and the Promotion of Empire: The Victoria League, 1901-1914", *The Historical Journal*, 45, 3, 2002, p 587
- 39 I. Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism against British Imperialism* (Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1981), p 20
- 40 A total of 22 000 books were sent to the Transvaal and 6 000 to the Free State. In total, 66 561 books were sent between 1904 and 1915 - E. B. Sargent, "The Victoria League", *United Empire*, 6, 1915, p 591. The League's literature scheme was also extended to the other colonies, and included the labour-intensive supply of newspapers, carefully matching donors and recipients.
- 41 CA: Dreyer Collection, File A/333, "Women's Interests; The Guild of Loyal Women; Seventh Annual Conference", sub-section on National Home Reading Union.
- 42 NASA: File Gov/1038/PS 5/10/07, Correspondence between J. Adamson and D. O. Malcolm, May 1907.
- 43 B. L. Dyer, "Libraries for Scantly Populated Districts", *Report of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science: Third Meeting, Johannesburg, 1905 [and] Fourth Meeting, Kimberley, 1906* (The Association, Cape Town, 1907), pp 525-526.
- 44 J. Roden, *Northward from Cape Town: The Anglican Church Railway Mission in Southern Africa, 1885-1980* (Sacram, York, 1999).

and the relief of Ms Seymour. The case of books would later travel on to Carolina, in the Transvaal.⁴⁵

Violet Markham's own views on the benefits of education and reading for non-English South Africans were ambivalent. Just before the Anglo-Boer War, she worried, for example, about the sharp "line of cleavage between the educated and the uneducated Kafir", yet affirmed the right of the blessings of knowledge and self-discovery.⁴⁶ Just after the war, the concern shifted to the "Boer child" to think "without bitterness of its English rulers, to appreciate their goodwill and intentions, to realize the dignity and responsibility of British citizenship, and to lay to heart those great lessons of unity and mutual respect on which the future of the Afrikaner race depends." The right kind of teacher and reading material was necessary for this task.⁴⁷ She later moderated her imperialist stance by acknowledging that Anglicisation was a mistake and that both "English and Dutch can worship at the common altar of a South African nationality, to which each will bring the best of its racial endowment".⁴⁸ For Violet Markham, the "nation of readers" reflected local political developments without sacrificing British supremacy.

The impact of these reading initiatives is difficult to assess. School-inspector reports do, however, reveal valuable insights into the use of books by schoolchildren and teachers. In the Cape Colony, one school-inspector was particularly enthusiastic about the reading material available in the school libraries. He saw the promotion of private reading as an effective antidote to the "Meester" system that got children to learn by rote. Although he believed that school libraries could greatly assist teachers, the response was not encouraging. One schoolteacher told him: "Believe me Mr Golightly, it's all I can do to stop the children from reading those books and get them to learn the lessons I set for them".⁴⁹ He also referred to the parents' encouragement of the use of English by schoolchildren, particularly for future employment opportunities. One farmer provided a placard to be hung up in a classroom with the words, "I may not speak bad 'gramer'". In the Transvaal, the impact of the Victoria League was more pronounced. Many school-inspectors acknowledged the League's contribution to a love of reading and its generous supply of books, but also noted the imbalance between English and Dutch books. Inspectors' reports were usually divided into a long and detailed section for white schools, and a brief section for schools for "Native" and coloured children. One inspector worried about the great desire for literary knowledge by "natives". He also questioned their eagerness to acquire skill in those subjects "which seem particularly to belong to the white races".⁵⁰

45 NASA: File LD/1161/AG5329/05, "Enquiry Concerning a Case of Books Despatched by the Victoria League", 1905

46 V R Markham, *South Africa Past and Present: An Account of its History, Politics and Native Affairs followed by some Personal Reminiscences of African Travel during the Crisis Preceding the War* (Smith, Elder, London, 1900), p 286

47 V R Markham, *The New Era in South Africa: With an Examination of the Chinese Labour Question* (Elder, London, 1904), p 83

48 V R Markham, *The South African Scene* (Smith, Elder, London, 1913), p 190

49 T S Golightly, *Reminiscences of a South African School Inspector* (Paarl Printing Company, Paarl, 1923, 1919 – delayed because of cost of paper and printing), p 61

50 See School Inspector reports, Transvaal Department of Education, *Report of the Director of Education, Report for the year ended 30th June, 1907* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1908), pp 67-70 for Potchefstroom-Krugersdorp circuit, p 84 for Rustenberg-Marico circuit. This attitude regarding the education of black children remained unchanged until 1914. "Too much book knowledge" was against

In March 1911, the League took over the work of the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa to become the Victoria League of South Africa, and admitted white males as members. Through its branches, it continued to provide books, also to visiting ships, lighthouse keepers, hospitals, the Antarctic and the Tristan da Cunha, Marion and Gough Islands. It raised funds for its other activities through regular book sales. These books were usually supplied by Juta's booksellers, and sold on Saturday mornings.⁵¹

Reading and "Nation-building"

On 1 March 1903, just two months after the request to the Guild to support the National Home Reading Union, the South African Home Reading Union was founded. It was headquartered in Pretoria, and its leadership reflected an aristocratic and elite female presence. Lady Edith Lyttelton was its first Honorary President, and after her departure from South Africa in 1905, Lady Maud Selborne (1858-1950) became its Honorary President. Lady Selborne served from 1905 until 1910, when she was herself replaced as Honorary President by Lady Dorothy Gladstone, who served in this role from 1910 to 1914. Lady Selborne was also connected with the Victoria League, and served on its Council from 1905 to 1910. Lady Jesse Rose-Innes (1860-1943) served as President under Lady Selborne until 1910. From 1903 to 1910, Lady Rose-Innes had also been active in the Pretoria Benevolent Society, the Princess Christian Home in Cape Town, the Pretoria Women's Cooperative Home Industries and the Young Men's Christian Association.⁵²

Although the South African Home Reading Union considered itself not to be an exclusively "Women's Society", men served as honorary members only. These men included Louis Botha, John X. Merriman, Percy Fitzpatrick, J.W. Sauer and J.W. Jagger. The Union's reading circles were almost exclusively composed of women. After the Union of South Africa came about in 1910, however, Professor J. Purves became its first male President. The South African Home Reading Union aimed to:

- check the growing tendency towards the reading of inferior literature;
- guide the general selection of reading matter, and suggest different courses of study;
- form circles to read and discuss some selected books;
- arrange occasional lectures by local literary men on various subjects, as a best means of both stimulating and keeping up a steady effort after mental culture;

the interests of "natives" and more attention should be paid to preparing them for housework and the farm so that they can take their "proper place in the social life", Report for the year ended 31 December 1914, p 111

51 The Johannesburg branch of the Victoria League of South Africa was founded on 11 November 1911, with "Milnerite" R Feetham as President, and supplied books to Missions to Seamen. By 1950, the League started its own lending library – Johannesburg Public Library, Johannesburg: Strange Collection, File MSA/741 and 742, *Minutes of the Victoria League of South Africa*

52 W J de Kock and D W Kruger (eds), *Dictionary of South African Biography II* (Tafelberg Uitgewers, Pretoria, 1983), p 332

- issue a *Quarterly Magazine of Literature, Art and Science* to enlist the interest and help of all men of learning in South Africa; and
- keep members in touch with one another across South Africa and help younger people and those living away from literary centres through book lists and correspondence.⁵³

Judging by its statements and courses, this Union had clear literary and intellectual ambitions, but in many other respects, it followed the example and pattern of the National Home Reading Union. By December 1908, it had 330 members that comprised ten reading circles of which two were in Natal, three in the Cape Colony, and five in the Transvaal. It grew to 473 members by the following year. The numbers stabilized at about 400 but the Union was more concerned with its commitment to “quality” than numbers. By 1915, it was still financially sound and branches reported busy programmes.⁵⁴

The outlook of the South African Nation Home Reading Union was Janus-faced. It looked to Europe for its example and standard, and kept a steady gaze on the South African literary scene. A muted or moderate colonial nationalism that informed its commitment grew stronger as the idea of Closer Union gripped both black and white South Africa from about 1906 to 1910. This is evident from the South African Home Reading Union’s strong association with Patrick Duncan, John X. Merriman, J.W. Sauer and Louis Botha.⁵⁵ It claimed further to have supported national ideals by awakening an “interest in the beginnings of South African literature” that included English and Dutch, as well as other languages.⁵⁶ The work of the Dutch-Afrikaans poet, Jan Celliers, regularly appeared in its journal’s pages, and it announced books available in English and Dutch. There was even an article on “Early Native Literature”,⁵⁷ but it was never in doubt that this Union was building the white reading nation.

Its work for “Children and Young People” also reflected this bounded racial tolerance. It issued lists of books in English and Dutch for different classes of readers. The lists were drawn up with a view to South African circumstances and were intended for members and teachers who could apply them in classrooms.⁵⁸ “Public libraries” and bookshops generously supported the Union’s activities. Subscription fees for Union members were reduced by several “public libraries”, although some later preferred to charge the normal rate but allow members to take out double the number of books. The Union regularly appealed to “public libraries” to offer such concessions to its members. The books mentioned in the Union’s lists were sold to members at a discount by local booksellers such as Maskew Miller in Pretoria and Esson & Perkins

53 “Objects and Regulations of the Reading Union” in *The South African Home Reading Union, The Bulletin*, 8, December 1908, p 1

54 “News of the circles: SAHRU notices, etc”, *The South African Bookman: The Quarterly Journal of the South African Home Reading Union*, 13, February 1915, pp 62-63

55 The Union, for example, officially congratulated John X Merriman on his appointment as Privy Councillor to King Edward - *The Bulletin*, New Series, Number Three, October 1909, p 200

56 “Notes and Comments”, *The South African Bookman: The Quarterly Journal of the South African Home Reading Union*, Number One, August 1910, p 1; “Editorial”, *The Bulletin: The Quarterly Journal of the South African Home Reading Union*, New Series, Number One, April 1909, p 1

57 A G G Lloyd, “Early Native Literature”, *The South African Bookman: The Quarterly Journal of the South African Home Reading Union*, New Series, Number Ten, March 1914, pp 198-202

58 “Editorial”, *The Bulletin: The Quarterly Journal of the South African Home Reading Union*, New Series, Number One, April 1909, p 2

in Johannesburg. Union members were also encouraged to assist their own journal, *The South African Bookman*, by ensuring that their local libraries and reading-rooms were subscribers and that leading booksellers in their area would display it prominently.

The local focus of the South African Home Reading Union did not recommend it too warmly to the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa. At its annual conference in 1904, the Central Committee of the Guild resolved to renew its support for the National Home Reading Union. A Guild member, Mrs. A. Graham, who was also a representative of the South African Home Reading Union, had claimed earlier that undesirable competition existed with both Reading Unions active in the country. She was, however, not present at the Guild's annual conference when the decision was taken. The ensuing spat with Dorothea Fairbridge (Honorary Secretary of the Central Literature Committee) about the way in which the matter was handled spilt over into the newspapers.⁵⁹ There were claims and accusations about which Reading Union was "first in the field" and why Mrs. Graham (herself a member of the Central Literature Committee), did not inform other members when the South African Reading Union had started its activities. Despite her protests, the snub was rendered by the Guild in the blunt view that the South African Home Reading Union was inferior to the National Home Reading Union because:

- The South African Home Reading Union was for women and girls only, whereas the National Home Reading Union was for men and boys as well;
- The South African Home Reading Union was entirely local in its arrangements, whereas the National Home Reading Union had direct communication with the outside world;
- The National Home Reading Union had a lower subscription;
- The South African Home Reading Union had no magazine, whereas an admirable one was sent nine months in the year to all members of the National Home Reading Union; and
- The National Home Reading Union had the cordial support of Doctor Muir and the Education Department (of the Cape Colony).⁶⁰

The resolution was placed before the conference delegates for discussion, during which a Mr. Noaks was asked to address the conference on the National Home Reading Union. The original resolution was then put to the meeting and carried unanimously. While some of the claims and accusations may not have been true, what probably counted more against the South African Home Reading Union was its "national" emphasis that accommodated Dutch and Afrikaans. This was not the national identity favoured by the Guild in its early years. In the Transvaal, the Guild was hesitant to adopt any of the Reading Unions. A branch of the South African Home Reading Union had, however, already emerged at the Guild's Rustenburg branch by 1904 with a box of books supplied by the children of the Oxford branch of the Victoria League.⁶¹

59 CA: Dreyer Collection, File A/333, Guild of Loyal Women News Clippings, 'Two Reading Unions' - correspondence in the *Cape Times* in January 1904

60 Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town : Guild of Loyal Women Collection, File A/2065, "*Guild of Loyal Women (Cape Colony)*, General Report for 1903", p 13

61 Johannesburg Public Library, Johannesburg: Strange Collection, File MSA/741 and 742, "*Guild of Loyal Women (Transvaal Division)*", p 85 By 1909 the Guild had difficulties in supporting the National

An even more sharply-focused “national” reading initiative was promoted a few years later by the Literary Sub-Committee of the Closer Union Society. This was a short-title for the Society for the Promotion of Closer Union in South Africa that was a project of the “Milner Kindergarten”. It was founded at Durban on 12 to 16 October 1908. There were strong overlapping interests with the objectives of the South African Home Reading Union, and they shared the membership of John X. Merriman, Patrick Duncan and J.W. Jagger, amongst others. There were therefore also similarities in their concerns with reading. The official journal, *The State: A South African National Magazine*, which first appeared in January 1909, was described as an all-South African magazine. It ran from 1909 to 1912. There was a “Reviews” section that announced South African titles in English, and translations of Afrikaans poems were frequently published. A Dutch edition of this journal ran for seven issues before ceasing publication. There were also sections on books for the young, and “The Bookshelf” offered new volumes of special interest to South African readers.⁶² Another standard feature was book announcements from the Maskew Miller and Juta & Darter booksellers, arranged under “Local” and “Colonial” edition categories.

H.G. Wells’s *The history of Mr. Polly* was serialized in the first few issues and the British strain in its “national” outlook was readily apparent. Its racial strain was not obscured at all. After the Union of South Africa came about in 1910, and with a new financial backer, it stated quite frankly, “It is, in short, the aim of ‘The State’ to appeal to the varied interests and tastes of the white population of South Africa”.⁶³ South African history books were particularly targeted for robust review. Professor J. Edgar, who was also a member of the South African Home Reading Union, for example, lambasted a history of South Africa by the Dutch author, E.C. Godée Molsbergen. This book had been sponsored by the “Afrikaanse Taalgenootskap” (Afrikaans Language Society), the “Zuid-Afrikaanse Onderwyzers Unie” (South African Teachers Union), and the “Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging” (Afrikaans Christian Women’s Society). The review charged that the book had a “violently anti-English” bias. “What a deplorable start for the new nation”, it went on to lament, “to have its young minds impressed thus with a feeling of resentment and antipathy towards the whole British Empire, of which they form a part!”⁶⁴

This magazine allowed for the cultural expression of a new South African identity that would bring white English and Afrikaners into the “new” nation. The “colonial nationalism” that it projected, however, still saw a stronger emphasis on the British

Home Reading Union because of rising subscription fees, the distance from its centre in London, and confusion about the two Reading Unions (Lady Hely-Hutchinson, for example, mistakenly gave her patronage to the South African Home Reading Union thinking it to be the National Home Reading Union) The Guild then simply resolved to encourage the formation of Reading Unions throughout the country – CA: GLW Collection, File A/2065, *Federal Leaflet*, August 1909, pp 168-169

62 *The State: A South African National Magazine*, 9, 2, September 1909, p 348; *The State: A South African National Magazine* 12, 2, December 1909, pp 805-807

63 It was originally financed by Abe Bailey, and thereafter by Florence Phillips, *The State: A South African National Magazine*, 5, 6, June 1911, p 810

64 “Reviews”, *The State: A South African National Magazine*, 3, 6, June 1910, pp 1018-1023

(English) than the South African (Dutch).⁶⁵ Perhaps this is why Dorothea Fairbridge, did not find it too “local” for her several articles and short stories.⁶⁶

Reading and the “volk”

Probably fed by this ambiguous national loyalty, the impact of the Anglo-Boer War and Milner’s Anglicisation policy, an even narrower Afrikaner “ethnic nationalism” came to envisage its own “nation of readers”. The origins and developments of Afrikaner women’s organizations reflect mixed motives and fortunes that belie the easy organic interpretations given much later. P.J. Meyer, for example, claimed that Afrikaner women’s organizations had always been narrowly interwoven with the religious and cultural life of the *volk*.⁶⁷ There was, however, no clear consensus at the time of their founding that these organizations agreed on who constituted the *volk* and which language should be supported. These however proved to be temporary differences as Afrikaner women’s organizations eventually converged on a shared ideological outlook. Central to the charitable and welfare roles of these organizations was the idea of the woman as a nurturer and bearer of culture. Women were therefore seen as ideally suited to teaching and transmitting Afrikaner culture from one generation to another. Promoting a love of reading and guiding that reading fulfilled a nation-building role that strengthened the Afrikaner nation, and subsequently contributed to ethnic mobilisation.⁶⁸

The “Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging” (Afrikaans Christian Women’s Society – ACVV) was founded on 1 September 1904 with the motto “Vir Kerk, Volk en Taal” (For Church, Nation and Language). It had its beginnings in the Cape Colony with a number of special women’s committees to provide food and clothes to prisoners of war in concentration camps. There had already been a number of large gatherings in November and December 1900 of both English and Dutch-Afrikaans women to protest the imprisonment and relocation of women and children, and to organize help for war victims.⁶⁹ Although its original name was the “Zuid-Afrikaansche Vroue Vereniging” (South African Women’s Society), it assumed a racial character when it added the word “Christelijk” (Christian) and replaced “South African” with “Afrikaansch” to become a white middle-class Dutch-Afrikaans women’s organization. It had clearly chosen an ethnic-specific definition of the nation as *volk*.⁷⁰ One reason for this putatively was to exclude members of the Roman Catholic Church, but the consequence was that it effectively restricted its membership to white

65 S Dubow, “Colonial Nationalism, the Milner Kindergarten and the Rise of ‘South Africanism’, 1902-10”, *History Workshop Journal*, 43, 1997, pp 70-74;

66 P Merrington, “Pageantry and Primitivism: Dorothea Fairbridge and the ‘Aesthetics of Union’”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 4, December 1995, pp 643-657

67 P J Meyer, “Die Vroueorganisasie as Volksorganisasie”, in SAVF, *Feesbrojure, SAVF: Uit die Verlede na die Toekoms, 1904-1979*, (SAVF, Pretoria, 1979), p 30

68 H J Terreblanche, *Ideologies Affecting Upper and Middle Class Afrikaner Women in Johannesburg, 1948, 1949 and 1958*, MA dissertation, University of South Africa, 1997, pp 37, 121, 145 See also G D Scholtz, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner, 1899-1910* V (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1978), p 394

69 E Hobhouse, *The Brunt of the War, and Where it Fell* (Wiley, London, 1902), pp 91-92

70 M du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, March 2003, p 160 See also M du Toit, “‘Die Bewustheid van Armoede’: the ACVV and the Construction of Afrikaner Identity, 1904-1928”, *Social Dynamics*, 18, 2, 1992, pp 1-25

Dutch-Afrikaans women.⁷¹ The early ACVV had strong links with the Dutch Reformed Church. Its first president, Elizabeth Roos, was the wife of a highly-positioned minister, and the ACVV copied its organizational style from the Dutch Reformed Church's already-existing "Vrouwen Zending Bond" (Women's Missionary Society).

Although its rhetoric was about "social upliftment", there was no doubt that it meant a racialised "upliftment" or philanthropy. Du Toit argues that the ACVV's history reveals the "entanglement of early Afrikaner nationalism with racially circumscribed philanthropic ventures".⁷² In other words, the ACVV actively participated in the promotion of a narrow Afrikaner nationalism. It differed sharply on this question with a similar women's organization, the "Zuid-Afrikaansche Vrouwe Federatie" (South African Women's Federation – SAVF) that was founded on 19 October 1904 in the home of General Louis Botha, and which included both English and Dutch-Afrikaans women. The SAVF initially anticipated a wider white South African nation, and cooperation between English and Afrikaans-speaking women was encouraged. Later, the two organizations decided to cooperate and concentrate their activities in their own regions. In this way, the "Oranje Vrouevereniging" (Orange Women's Association – OVV) and the "Natal Christelike Vrouevereniging" (Natal Christian Women's Association – NCVV) were respectively founded in 1908 and 1915. Collectively, they constituted the "Vroue Federale Raad" (Women's Federal Council).

The promotion of a love of reading ("aanwakkering van leeslus") was discussed at the very first annual conference of the ACVV in 1905. This was, moreover, combined strongly with an emphasis on Afrikaner history and the kind of history being taught at schools. These twin concerns continued to feature on the agenda of subsequent annual conferences. At its second annual conference in 1906, the ACVV expanded on the language and history themes. By studying their own history in their own language, it was maintained, Afrikaner children would learn to respect themselves and their own identity. To applause, President Elizabeth Roos even claimed that ignorance of their history had given rise to the many ("traitorous") National Scouts during the Anglo-Boer War. As their duty, mothers were expected either to read or explain Afrikaner history to their children. The ACVV would rather have had no history taught at all than the history then imparted to Afrikaner children. To remedy this "parlous" situation, conference delegates commissioned the writing of a "good" history, in consultation with "prominent men".⁷³ By 1914, the ACVV was still complaining about the matric prescribed history textbook, *With Kitchener to Khartoum*, regarding both its language and content. Roos advised teacher's unions to be vigilant about such material, and to agitate for their removal or prevent their purchase. It was argued that children should not even have been made aware of them lest their curiosity would lead them to read such books.⁷⁴

71 In September 1992, the ACVV opened its membership to all Christian women regardless of race, "Sonder 'Blank' in Grondwet sit ACVV Volkstaak voort", *Vrouevolksdiens*, 30, 4, October 1992, p 1

72 M du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, March 2003, p 160

73 CA: ACVV Collection, File A/1953/3/2/1, *ACVV Tweede Kongres gehoude te Cradock op 4 April 1906 en Volgende Dagen* (Van der Sandt de Villiers, Kaapstad, 1906), p 15 See footnote 64 for the review reference of the history book that is mentioned here

74 CA: ACVV Collection, File A/1953/3/2/1, *Handelinge van het Negende Kongres der ACVV gehoude te Noorder Paarl, 15-18 April, 1914* (Van der Sandt de Villiers, Kaapstad, 1914), p 22

The reading work of the ACVV and the SAVF cannot be fully understood without examining its contemporary intellectual and cultural context. British ignorance and prejudice marked the outlook of prominent leaders, and a social Darwinist philosophy underpinned the thought and action of administrators and opinion makers. Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929), a Victoria League member who had led a British inquiry into the conditions in the concentration camps and admired the work of British camp schools, claimed that “There had been no attempt whatever by the Boer Government in the Transvaal to provide organized education for their people”.⁷⁵ There had in fact been a very active Education Department and a sophisticated educational infrastructure under the Kruger Government, albeit neglectful of the children of English “uitlanders”.⁷⁶ Milner’s private secretary from 1901 to 1903, John Buchan, demonstrated the kind of prejudice found in British administrative circles of the time. Writing for an English audience, he had no hesitation in placing the “Boer”, whom he distinguished from the educated urban Dutch, just above the “native” in a hierarchy that all ranked below the British colonist. According to Buchan, these “Boers” had to be won to the British side in order to secure a great colonising force, even though they were “backward and simple”.⁷⁷ Even a contemporary sympathetic writer like Olive Schreiner espoused views on the South African nation that did not radically break with the racial and social Darwinist mould of the times.⁷⁸

At the same time, internal debates among the white Dutch-Afrikaans speakers about language affected schools and libraries. Since 1884, school-textbooks and general reading material in Dutch had already been sent to the libraries in the Transvaal, and to school libraries in the Cape Colony in order to combat Anglicisation.⁷⁹ During the Anglo-Boer War, the Leiden-based “Nederlands-Zuid-Afrikaanse Vereniging” (Dutch-South African Association – NZAV) also distributed books, brochures and pamphlets through a War Information Bureau. The supply of Dutch books was intended “de zuiverheid der taal te helpen in stand houden” (to help maintain the purity of the language).⁸⁰ This had not been enthusiastically received in some quarters where the promotion of Afrikaans was encouraged. While the Dutch books

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- 75 M G Fawcett, *What I Remember* (Unwin, London, 1924), p 163 Her daughter, Philippa Fawcett who had accompanied her on the visit to the concentration camps, returned in 1902 to help with “establishing” public elementary education in the Transvaal An active Milner-backed immigration of about sixhundred young English schoolteachers to South Africa just after the war was facilitated by the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, see Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town : Guild of Loyal Women Collection, File A/2065, *Guild of Loyal Women* (Cape Colony), “Report for 1903”, pp 23-24; J van Helten and K Williams, “‘The Crying Need of South Africa’, the Emigration of Single British Women to the Transvaal, 1901-1910”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, 1, October 1983, pp 17-38
- 76 See Ploeger, “Onderwys en Onderwysbeleid”; B M Theron, *A Social History of Pretoria during the First Phase of the Anglo-Boer War: October 1899 to June 1900*, MA dissertation, University of South Africa., 1984, pp 61-86
- 77 J Buchan, *The African Colony: Studies in the Reconstruction* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1903); D Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1993), pp 30, 67-68
- 78 P M Krebs, “Olive Schreiner’s Racialization of South Africa”, *Victorian Studies*, 40, 3, Spring 1997, pp 427-444
- 79 R C de Jongh, *Verborge-Een: Nederlands-Suid-Afrikaanse Vereniging Instellings op Keizersgracht 141 te Amsterdam* (Stigting Jan van Riebeeck, Pretoria, 1986), pp 6-7, 31
- 80 J Ploeger, “Die Staatsbiblioteek – Grepe uit sy Wordingsgeskiedenis, Deel 1 – die Geskiedenis van ’n Skenking”, *Lantern*, 16, 1, September 1966, p 50

served to counteract English, it was also seen as stifling the young Afrikaans language movement.

Reverend S.J. du Toit, who was Superintendent of Education in the “Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek”, was perceived by the Dutch suppliers as tardy in his reply to acknowledge receipt and thank them. A Pretoria headmaster had written directly to the NZAV requesting books for his school library, thereby revealing Du Toit’s inaction. Du Toit was doubtful of the value of Dutch and believed that “Cape Dutch” (Afrikaans) as the easier of the two languages, would eventually win against Dutch.⁸¹ He had probably also known of the experiment in a predominantly Dutch-speaking town in the Cape Colony where two “public libraries”, one English and one Dutch, were housed in a wing of the town hall. The average monthly circulation of English books was 230, compared to 7 Dutch books only. The average daily attendance at the former was 20, and at the latter nil. Soon thereafter, the Dutch library was shut down.⁸² Du Toit’s successor, Doctor N. Mansvelt was however strongly pro-Dutch and saw libraries as an effective instrument to promote Dutch culture.⁸³ The ACVV itself continued to use unmodified but not always grammatical Dutch, and it was only in 1917 that Afrikaans gained the upper hand.⁸⁴

The ACVV also sought to regulate children’s reading. School library collections were to be protected from books that were considered harmful and irreligious. When a Franschhoek member requested that a delegation from the Dutch Reformed Church should monitor the quality of these books, a debate followed about the place of religion in a balanced book collection. The argument was that Doctor Muir’s Department of Education was promoting a secular approach and not acknowledging God’s role in creation. A counter-argument by the Wellington member proposed that parents should explain controversial matters in books to children. In the end, the religious argument won the day, and a petition was sent to Muir.⁸⁵ The ACVV thus concerned itself with distributing reading material, with promoting a love of reading, and with “improving” literary taste by regulating reading.⁸⁶

Its work with rural school libraries was particularly extensive, and led to a comprehensive survey in 1930 of the prevailing conditions, and to the subsequent

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- 81 S J du Toit, *A Comparative Grammar of English and Cape Dutch* (D F du Toit, Paarl, 1902), cited in B L Dyer, *The Public Library Systems of Great Britain, America and South Africa* (s 1, Kimberley, 1903), p 32. At Girls High School in Pretoria, an inspector reported that during Dutch lessons, some students took pride in answering in the “Taal” rather than in good Dutch - Transvaal Education Department, *Report of the Director of Education for the Year ended 30 June 1908* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1908), p 123
- 82 P M Laurence, *Collectanea: Essays, Addresses and Reviews*, (Macmillan, London, 1899), p 263
- 83 H J Aschenborn, “Die Staatsbiblioteek – Deel 2, van 1887 tot die Hede”, *Lantern*, 16, 1, September 1966, p 59
- 84 M du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, March 2003, p 162 (footnote 36)
- 85 CA: ACVV Collection, File A/1953/3/2/1, *Handelingen van het Negende Kongres der ACVV gehouden te Noorder Paarl, 15-18 April, 1914* (Van der Sandt de Villiers, Kaapstad, 1914), p 22. The women’s organizations, often in cooperation with the Dutch Reformed and other churches, regularly sent deputations to government officials to encourage censorship of books
- 86 H Swart, *Die Bydraes van die Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging en die Vroue Landbouvereniging van Kaapland tot die Ontwikkeling van Biblioteekdienste in Kaapland*, M Bibl skripsie, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 1983, p 35

improvement of these libraries.⁸⁷ In response to pleas from branch members, advice about cooperation with other organizations and obtaining free books from The Netherlands was given in order to increase Dutch and Afrikaans books. Rothman was a significant player in this project and sought especially to increase the number of Afrikaans books. Her injunction, “laat ons ’n lesende volk wees ... om aan te gaan vir Kerk, Volk en Taal” (let us be a reading nation to strive for Church, Nation and Language) resonated with earlier calls from nationalist Afrikaner leaders to build a literary culture and a *volk* of readers.⁸⁸ The “Vroue-Landbouvereniging” (Women’s Agricultural Union) joined the ACVV in its reading work in 1929, and the task of Afrikaner nation-building assigned to reading was sustained throughout the 1930s.⁸⁹ Reflecting on this work many years later, Gerber spoke about “die klein bibliotekies wat die vroue ingerig het om die volk intellektueel op te hef”⁹⁰ (the tiny libraries which the women established in order to uplift the nation intellectually).

The initial tolerance for a more inclusive white nation envisaged by the South African Women’s Federation (SAVF) appeared to diminish shortly after the Union of South Africa came into being. Its early association with British women’s organizations such as the Liberal Women’s Association, the Victoria League and the Women’s Social and Political Union⁹¹ through its founder, Lady Georgiana M. Solomon (1845-1933), gradually dissolved as it began to focus more narrowly on the Afrikaans language and the Afrikaner *volk*.⁹² It emphasized both the “behoud van die Suid-Afrikaanse volk” (maintenance of the South African nation) and a Christian National outlook.⁹³

The SAVF’s education committee was constituted on 4 January 1905, and it immediately set about supporting the CNE schools by providing children with books and clothes, as well as furniture items for some schools. Money for this work was obtained through sales of wreaths for Paul Kruger’s funeral on 16 December 1904.⁹⁴ In its educational work, the SAVF cooperated closely with the Dutch Reformed Church. With the granting of responsible government in the Transvaal in 1907 and the incorporation of the CNE schools into the Education Department, its work in schools declined. But the SAVF’s advocacy of equal language rights after 1910 soon assumed struggle dimensions, with petitions to government and solidarity with campaigners for Afrikaans language rights.

87 H Swart, *Die Bydraes van die Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging en die Vroue Landbouvereniging van Kaapland tot die Ontwikkeling van Biblioteekdienste in Kaapland*, M Bibl skripsie, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 1983, pp 43-57

88 M E R Rothman, *Ons Saamreis: Feesuitgawe van die A.C.V.V. Vyf-en-twintig Jaar na haar Eerste Kongres “Vir Kerk, Volk en Taal”* (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad, 1930), pp 55-6; see also I Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924”, in S Marks and S Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-century South Africa*, (Longman, New York, 1987), pp 105-108

89 L Kruger, *Gender, Community and Identity: Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the Volksmoeder Discourse of Die Boerevrou (1919-1931)*, M Soc Sc dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1991, pp 286-288

90 A Gerber, “Die Vier Vroueverenigings se Dienste is Steeds Nodig”, *Vrouevolksdiens*, 19, 1, Februarie 1981, p 11

91 T C Pienaar, *In Diens van die Volk: Oorsig van die Werk en Strewe van die Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue-Federasie, Transvaal, 1904-1944* (Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel, Johannesburg, 1944), p 22

92 For polarization after the euphoria of Union, see H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003), pp 359-364

93 SAVF – *Vyftig Jaar van Seën, 1904-1954* (SAVF, Pretoria, 1954)

94 *Die SAVF in die Goudstad: 1905-1986* (Johannesburg Federal Insurance, Johannesburg, 1986), p 31

On 3 November 1911, the SAVF sent a letter of solidarity to General J.B.M. Hertzog, the Minister of Justice in the first Botha cabinet, proclaiming its admiration for his language policy.⁹⁵ In order to translate this admiration into action, the SAVF founded the first Dutch-Afrikaans Reading Union in Pretoria in 1912.⁹⁶ Initially, English was also allowed. The Union first met in a wood and iron hall in Rissik Street, Pretoria. Its first president, Mabel Malherbe, would later go on to publish the successful Afrikaans women's magazine, *Die Boerevrou*.⁹⁷ Soon there were several branches of the Union around Pretoria. Initially only Dutch books featured in its programme, and many members prepared their talks in English first before translating them into Afrikaans, but the perseverance of these Union branches contributed significantly to the development of the Afrikaans language.⁹⁸

Malherbe continued to provide the Union's branches with reading material, suggested themes and book titles, and tips on reading circles in the columns of *Die Boerevrou* well into the 1920s. Her articles encouraged the Union's readers to support the Afrikaans press, Afrikaans history and Afrikaans literature.⁹⁹ It is possible that the SAVF also supported the work of the South African Home Reading Union. This may be inferred from certain similarities in the political outlook of the two organizations. Some SAVF leaders, such as its founder and honorary president Lady Solomon and its first president, Mrs. Anna F.B. Botha (1864-1937), wife of General Louis Botha, were prominent in the leadership of the South African Home Reading Union, and active in its branch committees. Also, the wife of Jan Celliers, who was himself linked with the South African Home Reading Union, was a founder member of the Dutch-Afrikaans Reading Union. There may therefore have been some interaction and cooperation between the two reading unions. The efforts of these Dutch-Afrikaans women helped to stimulate the huge growth of the Afrikaans press during the 1930s.¹⁰⁰

By 1914, with the First World War looming, the women's organizations had made modest gains with their voluntary reading initiatives. They had also developed in directions that were more in keeping with a young, modern and industrial state. Their educational and reading work had gradually been incorporated into government departments, and there was increasing pressure and competition from welfare and other professionals. The impending war would itself trigger a review of their perspectives on race and national identity, and their roles in reading schemes.

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- 95 T C Pienaar, *In Diens van die Volk: Oorsig van die Werk en Strewe van die Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue-Federasie, Transvaal, 1904-1944* (Afrikaanse Pers Boekhandel, Johannesburg, 1944), p. 30
- 96 A Blignaut, *Van Leser tot Leser: 'n Gesprek met Leeskring* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1980), p. 9. Another source identifies the date of origin as 1911, see *Feesbrojure, SAVF: Uit die Verlede na die Toekoms, 1904-1979, Feesviering SAVF, Transvaal, 19-21 Oktober, 1979* (SAVF, Pretoria, 1979)
- 97 See L. Kruger, *Gender, Community and Identity: Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the Volksmoeder Discourse of Die Boerevrou (1919-1931)*, M Soc Sc dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1991, for a detailed analysis of *Die Boerevrou*
- 98 This Reading Union was still in existence by 1972 - see A Blignaut, *Van Leser tot Leser: 'n Gesprek met Leeskring* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1980), p. 9
- 99 "Lees en leesunies", *Die Boerevrou*, Maart 1927, pp. 7-8; "Lees en Leesunies", *Die Boerevrou*, Mei 1927, pp. 4-5
- 100 For the ACVV's promotion of Afrikaans publishing, see C F J Muller, *Sonop in die Suide: Geboorte en Groei van die Nasionale Pers, 1915-1948* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Kaapstad, 1990)

Conclusion

In the end, the women's organizations were building foundations for readers instead of "nations of readers". By developing basic reading skills, promoting the love of reading and providing reading material, they facilitated reading practices that allowed an exploration by readers of themselves and of other selves, of their own identities and other identities. Whether they succeeded in shaping these things towards nation-building, is debatable. What people do *with* reading is even more surprising and imaginative than what reading does *to* people. Different types of reading practices and circumstances that shape readers can just as easily lead to a congruence of views as to directly opposing but equally articulate views. It is not easy to predict the directions in which reading practices may take a reader. Values linked to their instrumental and inspirational dimensions combine in any number of ways in the lives of individuals and communities. Reading as or for vocational competence, reading as or for nation-building, and even reading as or for "critical performance"¹⁰¹ as Edward Said argues, can be both utilitarian and transcendent, both limiting and liberating.

101 E W Said, "The Book, Critical Performance, and the Future of Education", *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, 2001, p 17

Abstract

Women and women's organizations exploited available opportunities and spaces to assert themselves in South African public life in the early-twentieth century. Their educational interventions combined a special concern with nation-building and the kinds of history read by schoolchildren. This article examines the reading initiatives of a number of women's organizations in South Africa from 1900 to 1914. It reveals their political, educational, cultural, economic and personal entanglements, and their attempts to apply reading to nation-building. Their ambiguous legacy influenced the later expansion of reading and literacy schemes and the development of free public library services in South Africa.

Opsomming

Bou 'n nasie van lesers?

Vroueorganisasies en die leespolitiek in Suid-Afrika, 1900-1914

Vroue en vroueorganisasies het beskikbare geleenthede en ruimtes benut om hulleself in die vroeë twintigste eeu in die Suid-Afrikaanse openbare lewe te laat geld. Hulle opvoedkundige ingrypings was 'n kombinasie van 'n besondere belangstelling in nasiebou en in die tipe geskiedenis wat deur skoolkinders gelees is. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die leesinisiatiewe van 'n aantal vroueorganisasies in Suid-Afrika van 1900 tot 1914. Dit bekyk hulle politieke, opvoedkundige, kulturele, ekonomiese en persoonlike agendas en hulle pogings om lees in diens van nasiebou te gebruik. Hulle veelsinnige nalatenskap het die latere groei van lees en geletterdheidskemas, asook die ontwikkeling van gratis openbare biblioteekdienste in Suid-Afrika beïnvloed.

Key Words

Nation-building, reading regulation, women's organizations, imperialism; nationalism, school libraries, reading unions, reading circles.

Sleutelwoorde

Nasiebou, leesbeheer, vroueorganisasies, imperialisme, nasionalisme, skoolbiblioteke, leesunies, leeskringe.