

# Archival Research in the United States: A South African's Mission<sup>1</sup>

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**H**ITHERTO little-known and often unsuspected American-South African relationships in the spheres of history and culture are being uncovered by archival research conducted in the United States under a project of the Union of South Africa. This project aims at supplementing the South African Government archives, by microfilm or other copies of material of historic interest relating to South Africa known or believed to be available abroad. In 1951 three archivists were appointed for overseas research, their fields including Great Britain and other Commonwealth countries, Europe, and the North American Continent. The fruits of their research will be preserved in South Africa's National Archives for study by future historians and other research workers, possibly even from America and other countries.

The "New World" was allocated to a South African historian and former Rhodes scholar, Dr. C. F. J. Muller, faculty member of the University of South Africa. With Washington, D. C., as his headquarters, his research field included also Canada, Bermuda, and any other adjoining territory or island whence historical data relating to South Africa might be culled. A big field and a huge task for one man!

Dr. Muller, however, rolled up his sleeves in the Nation's capital and delved into the most obvious repositories of historical material on South Africa, the National Archives and the Library of Congress. He also made contact with other libraries and archives, with universities, and with a number of individuals in the United States, Canada, and Bermuda. The research, later aided by a nationwide distribution of a questionnaire, soon mushroomed across the continent. Archivists, historians, and other interested persons also passed on word of this project like drum beaters carrying news across Africa. The dust was shaken off many a tome and

<sup>1</sup>This article, by the director of the Union of South Africa Government Information Office, is reprinted, with slight changes, from the *South African-American Survey*, 1953-54. The author is also press attaché of his country's embassy.

manuscript and the South African scholar was soon immersed in a spider web of "leads."

#### SOURCES OF INFORMATION

It was all according to protocol. Dr. Muller was officially accredited to the appropriate American authorities and immediately received the first of many courtesies, official and unofficial, which facilitated his work in the United States.

Dr. Muller's research was mainly directed at the period shortly preceding, during, and after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, a period when the stress of events scattered far afield material of future historical interest that would normally have been preserved in local archives and libraries. The researcher's net, however, also caught fragments related to South Africa going as far back as the heyday of Cape Cod and Nantucket and other New England ports, whose whaling fleets visited South African shores in the early history of the Cape settlement. The American whalers used to know the southwest Africa port of Walvis Bay as Woolwich Bay. Innumerable logbooks of the whaling captains in uncounted museums, archives, and libraries offered absorbing browsing — a pleasure that Dr. Muller had to forego for the time being while he reviewed more modern sources of information.

Other tempting sources were the records of missionary societies, engineering and trading societies, and so on. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, for example, indicated the availability of numerous letters and reports on South Africa, from missionaries, at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. (Harvard College Library reported about 2,000 index cards on South Africa. Yale University, incidentally, has a sizable Africana section, built up largely through the efforts of Mr. Howell Wright, of Newtown, Conn., a lifelong student of Rhodes.)

The Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, reporting the possible availability of material, mentioned that it had "sent engineers all over the world." The Colorado State Archivist mentioned equally proudly that the Colorado School of Mines had "a number of distinguished alumni who worked in both gold and diamond mining in South Africa."

#### WARTIME TRADE IN MULES

On the side, clues were given as to the whereabouts, largely in New Orleans, of commercial material on shipments to South Africa, mainly shipments of lumber, mules, and horses during the Boer

War. A sidelight on the history of these shipments is that many of the American muleteers, finding themselves in South African ports with time on their hands, sought activity on the battlefronts.

Research pointed to a number of libraries and other repositories with considerable documentation on the period of the Boer War, much of it apparently still unclassified and much of it undoubtedly hidden in books and manuscripts classified under headings that give no clue as to the whereabouts of South African material believed to be there.

Apart from the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington, the New York Public Library was indicated by several experts as having an outstanding collection of materials on South Africa, including the Boer War period. The director of the Newark Public Library unselfishly mentioned the great sister institution in New York as having a collection of public documents on Africa regarded as one of the most complete in the United States.

#### VOLUNTARY PUBLICISTS FOR THE UNION

In passing, it might be mentioned that the research revealed that several persons who had not hitherto made their interests known to the South African Mission in the United States were amiably engaged in promoting factual and favorable information about the Union. Some wrote nostalgically about former associations with sunny South Africa. A camera fan from Madison, Ind. (who also had a vague recollection of "my father selling a horse to be shipped to the Boers"), said he and his wife had traveled in the Union; he had more than a thousand Kodachrome slides of pictures taken there and had given nearly 200 public showings of this material. He "liked the country so well" that he was planning to return there.

Among the institutions with Boer War material the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, N. Y., drew attention to the document, "Selected Translations Pertaining to the Boer War" (1905). The Library of Congress revealed the existence of "a large collection of stereoscopic views of the Boer War and the personalities of the time," also of a large portrait collection.

The Free Library of Philadelphia revealed a surprising list of books and pamphlets on South Africa, including John H. Ferguson's doctoral dissertation, *American Diplomacy and the Boer War* (University of Pennsylvania, 1937); James Green's *Causes of the War in South Africa, From the American Lawyer's Standpoint* (1901); scrapbooks on the war; and *The South African War, a Word of Truth*, by the Trans-Atlantic Society of America (1902).

The U. S. Military Information Division of the Free Library contains reports on military operations in South Africa.

#### SENTIMENT IN THE U. S.

A valued correspondent in historic Williamsburg, Va., Mr. E. G. Swem, gave leading information on persons believed to have South African material. He recalled one Webster Davis, a prominent United States Government official during the Boer War period, addressing "a large and enthusiastic crowd in Washington, D. C., in 1900." He also attended a meeting, in Chicago in 1901, of Boer sympathizers, presided over by Louis Post, editor of the literary weekly *The Public*. This meeting passed resolutions condemning the sale of mules to the British. Mr. Swem mentioned various staunch friends of the Boers; but there was also pro-British sentiment, the performance of an opera being dramatically interrupted for an announcement of the relief of Mafeking.

A pro-Boer or pro-British sentiment ran through much of the correspondence received. An elderly Vermont correspondent recounted without rancor how he was mobbed and beaten up in London for denouncing the Chamberlain policy. The Illinois State Library offered the text of a petition to the Governor of that State from the American Transvaal League to appoint a commission to solicit funds for inmates of the concentration camps. The same library forwarded the text of a letter from John Peter Altgeld, former Governor of Illinois, to another American personage discussing a suggestion that President Paul Kruger visit the United States.

#### CONSULAR POST REPORTS

One of Dr. Muller's objectives was to locate material believed to be in the estates (or bequeathed to archives and libraries) of prominent Americans who were well known in South Africa before and during the Boer War, and to contact still-living Americans of the same group.

In this connection he found much material in the Foreign Affairs Section of the National Archives, including especially the "post reports" of American consuls in the two republics and in the Cape and Natal. Some of these observers were in a peculiar position as they acted for the British Government in the Transvaal and Orange Free State and were also called upon in certain cases to act for residents of the republics, for instance, in passing on mail. Research in this field showed that these reports illustrated nearly all aspects

of the war and that the American consuls played the most important part among all consuls in South Africa at the time. Consular reports and other records were found to contain much material concerning, *inter alia*, John Hays Hammond and other Americans concerned in the Jameson Raid of 1896. At this writing Dr. Muller has already microfilmed nearly 26,000 pages of these records.

The Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress yielded many documents on South Africa addressed to or written by American statesmen, including President McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt before and after he became President, and John Hay, then Secretary of State, whose son was American consul in Pretoria during the Boer War.

#### PERSONAL CONTACTS

Among living Americans with recollections of the period under study, Dr. Muller contacted Mr. Walter Mein, of California, who, as a Rand mining engineer, witnessed the Jameson Raid and whose father, Thomas Mein, was imprisoned in connection with the same event. Another helpful contact, and still a striking personality in his eighties, was Capt. John Hassell, also of California, who captained the so-called American Scouts fighting on the Boer side.

Other obvious "leads" were the still living "irreconcilables" (or their descendants), who refused to take the oath of allegiance to Great Britain after the war and who settled in Texas and New Mexico. They were mostly Snymans and Viljoens, including the restless Gen. Ben Viljoen, who on occasion joined in skirmishes on the Mexican border.

The strangest figure in the group surviving the Boer War, one known in three continents and a figure of mystery in events concerning the South African War and the two World Wars, was discovered in a United States penitentiary. During World War II he was sentenced to a long term for espionage against the United States, and the involved story of events that led to his conviction is stranger than fiction.

Inevitably the answers to a broad questionnaire did not refer specifically to the period studied but referred also to figures associated with earlier days of South African history. Several references were available on the Rev. Daniel Lindley, the Pennsylvania missionary after whom a South African town is named. Lindley and his young wife went to South Africa in 1834. Stern Paul Kruger, later president of the South African (Transvaal) Republic, was said to have been strongly influenced by Lindley's teachings, and he endeared himself to the pioneering farmers. According to the

*Encyclopedia of Missions* (Bliss) the Dutch farmers said of him: "If there be a human name that warms the heart of a Natal Trek Boer, it is the ever-to-be-remembered name of Daniel Lindley."

#### SOUTH AFRICA'S GIFT TO THE U. S.

About the same time South Africa sent its heart-warmer to America — but not as a missionary! The California State Library (after South Africa apparently only California would do!) yielded the story of one Joshua Abraham Norton, resident in South Africa from 1820 to 1848. He went to California at the time of the Gold Rush and later became the eccentric Norton I, "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico." In that role he became one of San Francisco's most beloved characters. Much has been written about him, the best-known being the book *Emperor Norton, the Mad Monarch of America*, by Allan Stanley Lane (1939).

A Massachusetts source volunteered the information that a South African Jewish philanthropist named A. A. Marcus came to settle in Boston in the eighties. There he was known as "der Africaner" — "and," added the informant, "he was quite a guy!"

These are but a few of the eye-catching ripples on the broad river of history. The presence of much archival treasure has been indicated but much dredging still has to be done to complete this research. Meanwhile American historians and archivists have indicated that the South African research in the United States is the most comprehensive of its kind ever undertaken in this country. Several organizations, spurred to interest by Dr. Muller's work, have instituted their own research in this field; and the fruits of these independent researches will undoubtedly also become available to South Africa. Already the possibility is envisaged of future American research workers having recourse to the South African Archives as affording the most complete collection of historical material now scattered and largely unclassified in the United States.

It is Dr. Muller's hope that this summary of his objectives will promote further interest in his mission and additional information on the subject of his research.<sup>2</sup> He regards the friendly and helpful interest already shown by so many correspondents and other contacts as heart-warming evidence of the sound and deep-rooted cultural relationships existing between the United States and the Union of South Africa.

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