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To cite this article: Brian Willan (2022): Revisiting Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary* , Journal of the African Literature Association, DOI: [10.1080/21674736.2021.2016252](https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2021.2016252)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2021.2016252>



Published online: 12 Jan 2022.



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## Revisiting Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*

Brian Willan

Sol Plaatje University, and North West University, South Africa

### ABSTRACT

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932) is one of South Africa's best known political and literary figures, his novel *Mhudi* now part of the literary canon. Yet his *Mafeking Diary*, written during the siege of Mafeking, one of the best known episodes of the South African War of 1899–1902, has been surprisingly neglected. In this article I suggest that this may have to do with the indeterminate status of the genre of the diary, and the fact that it does not fit in easily with a nationalist narrative that has privileged the political. In arguing for its importance, I look at the social and intellectual influences that helped form Plaatje's world view as reflected in the diary; the circumstances in which he wrote it; his reasons for writing it; who he envisaged would read it; how its nature and form were affected by the events that went on around him; the choices he made about what to include and what to omit; the literary models upon which he drew; the linguistic choices he made; the opportunities the diary provided to develop not only his literary skills but a wider sense of self.

### KEYWORDS

Plaatje;  
African literature;  
diary genre;  
siege of Mafeking;  
South African War

Sol Plaatje (1876–1932) is one of South Africa's best known political and literary figures—court interpreter, journalist, newspaper editor, political leader, a co-founder of the SANNC (later ANC) and author of an impressive range of books, in both English and Setswana, his native tongue. His books include a seminal political tract, *Native Life in South Africa*, published in 1916; a novel, *Mhudi*, written mostly in 1920 but only published ten years later; a collection of proverbs; a Tswana “Reader,” jointly authored with Daniel Jones, the leading phonetician of his day; and translations (or re-workings) into Setswana of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and *Julius Caesar*, the latter published posthumously. *Mhudi* in particular has been the focus of sustained critical attention and has achieved, it would be fair to say, almost iconic status.

My concern in this article, however, is with an earlier literary venture: the diary he kept in the siege of Mafeking (Oct 1899–May 1900).<sup>1</sup> At the age of 22 he found himself in Mafeking on the eve of the war through having secured a job as clerk and interpreter to the Resident Commissioner and Civil Commissioner, C.G.H. Bell, a year earlier; prior to this he had worked for four and a half years as a messenger and letter carrier for the Post Office in Kimberley. He began his diary on 29 October,

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**CONTACT** Brian Willan  [brian.willan1@googlemail.com](mailto:brian.willan1@googlemail.com)  Sol Plaatje University, and North West University, South Africa.

two weeks into the siege, and kept it up, with entries for most days, until 30 March 1900, six weeks before Mafeking was relieved. Thereafter the diary remained unknown to the wider world until the 1970s when one of Plaatje's descendants brought it to the attention of John Comaroff, an anthropologist then engaged in fieldwork among the Tshidi Barolong in the Mafeking district. The original edition of the diary, edited by John Comaroff, was published in 1973, followed by further editions in 1989 and 1999, incorporating the results of further research and making possible a more accurate rendering of Plaatje's handwritten original.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly fifty years on from its original publication it is striking how neglected it has been in comparison with his other writings. Certainly it has been much cited and drawn upon by historians as a source of information, providing as it does unambiguous evidence of the extent of black involvement in the defence of Mafeking: emblematic, therefore, of the larger project to reclaim the South African War as a conflict that involved all the people of the region. If one needed to disprove the notion that this was "a white man's war," Plaatje's published diary was perhaps the single most striking piece of evidence available.

What has been largely missing, however, has been a consideration of the his diary as a text in its own right, as literary artefact—this despite its status as one of the very few diaries to have been written (or at least to have survived) by black South Africans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> There are probably several reasons for this. Partly I think it is that its subject matter—the drama of the siege—has predominated over the form, militating against a proper consideration of the ways in which the story of the siege was represented and mediated via the perceptions and standpoint of the author of the diary. Such a tendency in turn has fed off the difficulties of dealing with the inherently indeterminate genre of the diary.

Yet, questions about form are not inconsequential. Was the diary intended as a purely private document or did its author have a wider audience in mind, and if so, who precisely? Is it to be considered fiction or non-fiction? Has its form obscured the degree of creativity that went into it?

A further reason for the relative silence on Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary* is that it does not fit in readily with what one might call a grand narrative of nationalism, a public engagement with the kind of themes which are so readily evident in both *Native Life in South Africa* and *Mhudi* and which have preoccupied the critics. In these books Plaatje speaks to a wider public audience and as a spokesman for a wider cause. In his diary this is not the case. It is essentially a private rather than a public document and the picture that emerges is one of rather greater ambiguity and complexity. He is writing at a time when South Africa was not yet defined by the binaries of the segregationist grand project. When he starts off his diary he managed to negotiate his way without too many difficulties, and at times with transparent enjoyment and humor, through the interplay of identities that his situation required: amongst others, as loyal British subject at war with an enemy of the empire; as a dutiful and conscientious colonial civil servant; as a Morolong intimately connected with the interests and concerns of those amongst whom he lived; as a committed Christian. There was not yet the burden of representation that defined much of his later life.

Unsurprisingly, in such a situation, what he wrote has co-existed uneasily with the simplified contours of broader nationalist narratives, or of interpretive frameworks that have often failed to take account of the specific experiences of human actors in the circumstances in which they actually lived. Vivian Bickford-Smith has pointed to similar issues in relation to Tiyo Soga. Postcolonial theoretical paradigms, as he also points out, have not always been helpful in understanding consciousness and individual circumstance in a situation in which engagement with aspects of “white” culture can be dismissed as “strategic,” “inauthentic” or as “mimicry.”<sup>4</sup> Echoes, one might add, of that condescension which Plaatje and others experienced in their own lifetime as a segregationist discourse became increasingly dominant.

My argument is that a more nuanced approach is required. We need to escape not only from a preoccupation with the events of the siege, and the apparently overwhelming significance of the war, but from the weight of history that followed. We need to look more closely at the text and its author, and at the interactions between the two. And to address what are perhaps some more traditional literary concerns: literary form and the influence of literary models; the opportunities and constraints inherent to the genre of the diary; the nature of the creative process and the textual practice that was part of it; at decisions on what to include and what not to include; at self-representation and self-expression.

My aim in this article is not so much to attempt a comprehensive assessment of the Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary* but to highlight several issues which illustrate the kind of approach which I think is required.

### Deciding to write a diary

Understanding Plaatje’s decision to start a diary requires a consideration of the immediate circumstances in which he found himself in September and October 1899, his own perceptions and experiences, and the broader social and intellectual contexts that had shaped these.

Plaatje never stated explicitly why he started his diary, but given the large number of other people, known to him, who had decided to do so it is scarcely surprising that he should have done likewise. In particular, Charles Bell, with whom he was in daily contact, had started his diary on 1 October, two weeks before the beginning of the siege. At some point (it is not clear exactly when) he asked Plaatje to type out his diary for him, which he continued to do until the end of the siege (even after he had stopped writing his own).<sup>5</sup>

In fact Bell was only one of many who decided to keep a diary. William Geyer, the first clerk and assistant RM, started his on 10 October, admittedly in a rather more desultory way, and he was followed by a good number of Baden Powell’s officers, a few of his men, some of those serving in the Town Guard, a handful of women, and—as one would expect—the war correspondents. All were aware that Mafeking was very much in the news, that it looked set to play an important part in the war, and that they were part of the story. Their writing constituted a way of interpreting their personal history in the light of the crucial events of the time.

Even without their example, however, Plaatje would have needed little encouragement. The late Victorian era, as has often been remarked, was the great age of the diary, associated with cultures of literacy, notions of a self-conscious self, and aspirations towards individual progress and improvement—likely to be as true in the Cape Colony as it was in England. According to Rebecca Steinitz, in an important recent study, the reason why the diary was so ubiquitous in nineteenth-century Britain (to which she might have added the English-speaking world) “is that the genre’s form made it a uniquely effective vehicle for the dominant discourses of the century. For men and women alike, the diary’s totalizing yet elastic temporal and spatial conventions enabled the enactment of Enlightenment observation and organization, Romantic interiority, Evangelical and secular self-improvement, Victorian domesticity, and imperial geographies and ethnographies.”<sup>6</sup> All things, one might add, that are very evident in Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*.

In Plaatje’s case a culture of writing and self-expression was already central to his being. At Pniel, where his family had been closely associated with the German missionaries, and where he attended the mission school, he would have been familiar with the lengthy handwritten *Tagebücher* which Rev. Westphal and his colleague, Rev. Baumbach, kept, and in which members of his own family sometimes figured. In Kimberley, once he had moved there in 1894 to take up a job with the Post Office, he diligently pursued his own education, and in particular applied himself to improving his knowledge and command of English. He was involved, for example, in an organization called the South Africans Improvement Society whose stated aims were “firstly, to cultivate the use of the English language, which is foreign to Africans; secondly, to help each other by fair and reasonable criticism in readings, English composition, etc.” Attached as he was to his native Setswana, English was nevertheless vital to getting on in the colonial society in which he lived: the opportunity for he and his friends to practise it amongst themselves, and in congenial circumstances such as this, was always going to be very welcome.<sup>7</sup>

More than that, though, we know that Plaatje had already—by 1896—begun to keep what was described as “a notebook” in which he wrote details of transactions made and money spent, for this was mentioned in a civil case that his landlord had initiated for alleged non-payment of rent. What he had written in the notebook was the crucial piece of evidence that turned the case in his favor. Whether this went further and contained his thoughts on other things is unknown, but it is quite possible. Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary* clearly had its antecedents.<sup>8</sup>

Part of Plaatje’s immersion in a culture of writing and self-expression may well have been a familiarity with the genre of the published diary, very much in vogue at the time.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Pepys, published in a variety of editions, was the biggest seller, but there were numerous variants to the genre, including highly popular satires like *Diary of a Nobody* (1892) by George and Weedon Grossmith, portraying the social aspirations of Mr Charles Pooter. The success of any satire depends upon an assumption of familiarity with what is being satirized: given Plaatje’s delight in satirizing, in his own diary, the social aspirations of his friend Patrick Lenkoane (a fellow member of the South Africans Improvement Society in Kimberley) it is by no means impossible that he had read the book or others like it. Interestingly, and perhaps by no means irrelevant here, the one book (beyond religious texts and Shakespeare)

which Plaatje is known to have read at this time was Max O'Rell's *John Bull and Co*, a humorous celebration of the glories of the British empire, in the form of a travelogue, and written by a Frenchman: he read a chapter at a meeting of the South Africans Improvement Society in Kimberley in 1895.<sup>10</sup>

Given, then, what is known of Plaatje's social and intellectual background, and of the wider tradition of diary writing, his decision to keep a diary scarcely comes as a surprise: it just needed a trigger. That was provided by the outbreak of war, and by an awareness—widely shared in Mafeking—that what was about to follow was likely to be of historical importance and hence worth writing about. Unlike many of Mafeking's other diarists, however, Plaatje, would go well beyond the mere recording of the progress of the siege.

### The attractions of English

After deciding to start writing a diary the next key choice he made was to write in English—mostly at any rate. This can be attributed to a number of factors. One was that English would have simply seemed the natural medium to him to write about the public spectacle about to unfold: to do so was only to emphasize his allegiance to the imperial cause, providing as it did a language not only of patriotism and governance but one of interiority too. Another factor was that it provided a very welcome opportunity to practise and to improve his fluency—and in a rather different register from the formal, legal form of the language which he used at work (e.g. in taking down witness statements), both in the office and in the courtroom when he was acting as interpreter.

A further consideration relates to the question of who the diary was for. Whilst it is mostly written as a private diary it is likely that Plaatje kept it as a record which he could, in due course, share with his wife Elizabeth, who had left Mafeking for the safety of the southern part of the Colony some weeks before the start of the siege. She was of Mfengu origin, a native Xhosa speaker, until very recently a mission school teacher, and English was their preferred language of communication: “in coming to an understanding,” he wrote subsequently of their initial courtship, “we both used the language of educated people which happened to be the only official language of our country at the time.”<sup>11</sup> And if he did not survive the siege, here at least would be a record of his experiences for her to treasure. For both private expression—the communication of his “innermost feelings”—and a language appropriate to the recording of an imperial feat of arms, then, English was his natural choice of medium, this despite the fact that it was the third language (after Setswana and Dutch) that he had learnt.

More remarkable than his choice of medium is what he does with it. The way in which he experiments quite self-consciously with the forms and capabilities of the English language is one of the most striking characteristics of his diary. Here is an ethos of self-improvement writ large. Many passages reflect his efforts to develop his (already considerable) literary skills, to formulate and to express his thoughts and feelings, to experiment with both vocabulary and narrative form, to describe what he saw going on around him. He would try out obscure new words (like “funambulism,” the art of tightrope walking), indulge in word play or elaborate,

convoluted sentences—some of which worked rather better than others.<sup>12</sup> He constructed elaborate metaphors, drawing on a variety of sources for inspiration, the Bible amongst them. Once, for example, he compared the attempt of a large group of black refugees to escape through Boer lines with the biblical exodus of the children of Israel: Charles Bell looked like “their Moses,” Sgt Abrams “their Aaron” and he concluded that it was doubtful, looking at “the unfortunate 900 we want to get rid of,” if there “ever was an exodus so momentous as the one on the day on which Israel came out of Egypt.”

Musical metaphors were also a particular favorite. “To give a short account of what I found war to be, I can say,” Plaatje announced in his first entry, “no music is as thrilling and as immensely captivating as to listen to the firing of the guns on your side. It is like enjoying supernatural melodies in a paradise to hear one or two shots fired off the armoured train; but no words can suitably depict the fascination of the music produced by the action of a Maxim, which, to Boer ears, I am sure, is an exasperation which not only disturbs the ear but also disorganises the free circulation of the listener’s blood.”

Warming to his theme he proceeded to compare the varied sounds of gunfire around Mafeking with musical performances he remembered in Kimberley: the “boom” from the armored train reminded him of the way the Payne family “silenced a boisterous crowd with the prelude of a selection she is going to play on the violin”; the staccato sound of the Maxim brought to mind the organ of the Kimberley RC choir, and even its “charm could justly be compared with that of the Jubilee Singers performing one of their quaint and classical oratorios.”

Arguably the connection between the sound of a Maxim gun and the Jubilee Singers was a bit tenuous: at this point in an already over-extended metaphor it looks as though his real concern was to find a way of including what had been one of the most memorable experiences of his time in Kimberley. For here, as elsewhere in his diary, Plaatje reflects back on his earlier life and experiences, making connections with what he now saw going on around him. So we hear about his friends and family, recollections of his time in Kimberley, memories of other individuals like Ernst Westphal, Davidson Msikinya and Patrick Lenkoane, as well as his thoughts and observations on those he was now close to in Mafeking—Charles Bell, David Phooko, the Chief, Wessels Montshiwa, the journalist Angus Hamilton, amongst others.

There is a telling reference, too, to one other source of inspiration so far as deployment of the English language was concerned: Tengo Jabavu, editor of the English/Xhosa newspaper, *Imvo Zabantsundu*. On 27 February 1900, Plaatje pondered what would happen if the Bechuanaland Protectorate Chiefs and their people were to take up arms against the Boers and invade the Transvaal: “‘Humanity will shudder’, to use Jabavu’s phrase,” he wrote. He remembered these words from an editorial Jabavu had written in *Imvo* on 23 April 1896, nearly four years previously, when considering the consequences of an outbreak of war between Britain and the Transvaal and the likely reaction of Africans living there. It was testimony not only to Plaatje’s extraordinarily good memory but to the influence of an African print culture that was a vital element in the self-improving world of which he was a part in Kimberley in the 1890s.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly the diary draws upon memories and influences of an earlier phase of his life, when he lived at the Pniel mission (run by missionaries of the Berlin Missionary Society): it left its mark in a predilection for the kind of biblical metaphor quoted above, and references in passing to several different psalms, again reflecting one of the key components of his upbringing.

Yet Plaatje's diary was not wholly written in English. Plaatje frequently used words and phrases from Dutch, Setswana and Xhosa (also some Zulu and Sotho). Sometimes this was just to record what other people had said in their original words. Sometimes it was to use a term which he found difficult to translate, or which he thought conveyed its meaning far better in its indigenous form than in English—for example the Xhosa term “*isiqu*” (which he used on several occasions), meaning “body,” but with a range of associations incorporating notions of self and personality. Sometimes he just preferred to use an indigenous term because it had far better onomatopoeic quality than its English equivalent—like the Tswana term “*makasono*,” derived from the English Maxim gun.<sup>14</sup> Here was a reminder, in short, not only of the depth and range of his linguistic knowledge but of his recognition of the particular contexts and registers in which it made sense to use languages other than English. And that whilst English was the natural medium for most things he wrote about in his diary it was by no means the only way of relating to the world available to him.

### Refashioning a genre

A glance at the manuscript of Plaatje's diary reveals several textual characteristics that shed light both on the way it was written and the wider use to which it could be put. First of all, a number of passages are written in shorthand: this was Plaatje seeking not so much to protect what he was writing from inquisitive eyes as providing a means of practising his shorthand which he sometimes used at work, with a view also to taking the civil service examinations in this subject. A utilitarian function comparable, in other words, to his wish to practise and improve his English.

The second major textual characteristic is the presence in the diary of some passages written in another hand. This is Plaatje's friend David Phooko, a young man of Mfengu origin who had come to Mafeking some months previously to take up a job as clerk and interpreter to the Inspector of Native Locations, and was now sharing a room with him in a house belonging to Silas Molema, one of Mafeking's leading headmen. Quite a few entries in December 1899 and January 1900 are in Phooko's hand, dictated to him by Plaatje. It is clear that they had a good time doing this and they include some of the most amusing passages in the diary. It turned a solitary activity into a companionable one, and it helped pass the time. For David it was also a chance to improve both his English and his handwriting, and they enjoyed reminiscing about the times they had in Kimberley, sharing memories of acquaintances they had in common—particularly Patrick Lenkoane and the “Lenkoanics,” or humorous stories, which his antics inspired.

David's punctuation and grammar (especially his use of tenses) were less than perfect, however, and Plaatje went over some of the passages he had taken down, making a few corrections and additions as he did so. David had problems with



spelling too. Words like “miscellaneous,” “flabbergasted,” “innocent” were a challenge, but he had a good ear and when he was unsure of the correct spelling of a word his phonetic renderings were usually clear enough. One can certainly understand why he thought that Plaatje said “lowest state” rather than “low estate” (“I remember my low estate with an afflicted sense”), missing the biblical allusion (Luke 1:48, Romans 12:16) that was in Plaatje’s mind—a trivial misunderstanding, perhaps, but a telling indication of rather different literary sensibilities.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, David was sufficiently encouraged by the exercise to begin a diary of his own, although unfortunately this has not survived.<sup>16</sup>

Plaatje’s use of his diary to practise his shorthand, and his collaboration with David Phooko on some of the entries, thus reflects a broader vision of the function of his diary than most of his white compatriots similarly engaged, and indeed when compared to the classic notion of the diary as individual and private: indicative of the way in which he brought his personal concerns, and personal relationships, to the “uniquely flexible” form of the diary to give it a very particular flavor, exploiting and adapting it for his own purposes.<sup>17</sup>

## Identities

The personal diary, it has been argued, was pre-eminently the genre of individual sensibility, linked historically to the emergence of new conceptions of the bourgeois self in the western world: playing a part not only in reflecting new forms of consciousness but in helping to constitute them. In *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, Karin Barber asks the question, “Did the *diary*, the letter and the autobiography play a comparable role in the colonies?” Her answer, on the evidence of the contributions to this book, is that they did, but in different and more complicated ways, and that “individuals and communities adopted the established genres of diary and letter and refashioned them to express new forms of being.”<sup>18</sup> How far does such a formulation help us to understand what Plaatje was doing in his diary?

Certainly Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary* is notable for the ways in which it enabled him to explore different aspects of his identity. In places this comes through in an unselfconscious manner, a taken for granted identification, for example, with the Barolong as against the Boers, or against those whites within Mafeking who failed to accord them the respect they deserved, or against the Shangaans of the “Black Watch” who seek to relieve the Barolong of their captured cattle when they brought them back into Mafeking. Likewise his role as a colonial civil servant, conscientiously carrying out his duties and identifying himself, for the most part, with Charles Bell, the magistrate and civil commissioner, in his efforts to deal with the increasingly difficult problem of the black refugees in Mafeking. Not surprisingly, on occasions being both a Morolong and a civil servant could give rise to tensions but Plaatje had a well practised ability to see things from all sides, calmly setting out on one occasion—when discussing the way rationing was being handled by the military authorities—different viewpoints in the matter. His conclusion was that from “a Serolong point of view the whole jumble is more annoying than comforting” but he was prepared to make some excuses for the military authorities “as the arrangement

is in the hands of young officers who know as little about Natives and their mode of living as they know about the man in the moon and his mode of living.”<sup>19</sup>

At other times, however, Plaatje is concerned more with himself, using his diary in a rather more self-conscious way to reflect upon his personal situation. Sometimes this was to feel sorry for himself, or to admit that he felt frightened. More often it was to see the humor of the situation he was in, conscious as he was of the contrasts between life before and life during the siege. Thus he was struck by one courtroom scene and the unusual appearance of the parties involved: “The plaintiff’s attorney was in military attire; lawyer for the defence, never shaved since the siege, all hairy and dressed in a third hand suit without a collar, looked more like a farmer than an attorney. Myself in knickerbockers and without a jacket, looked more like a member of the football team or a village cyclist than a court interpreter.” As is evident elsewhere in the diary, Plaatje had a keen eye for the humor of everyday life.

One of the most striking roles that Plaatje cultivates in his diary is that of the family man. Perhaps this was influenced in part by the knowledge that his wife Elizabeth would read his diary and could expect to be in his thoughts. Be that as it may, his mention of his wife and children, and his comments about how much he missed them, amidst his reporting of the events of the siege, raise some interesting issues about masculine and feminine spheres. In Plaatje’s diary, unlike many others, the two co-exist quite happily, providing a clue perhaps to a sensibility that would find further expression many years later in his novel *Mhudi*. Similarly his own domestic arrangements at “Maratiwa” where he lived. The “worst news I have received for months,” he wrote on 25 March 1900, was that Emang Marumolwa, who cooked and cleaned for him, was being recalled home by her mother. “Emang has been such an acquisition to our domestic [circle] that we wonder what we can do without her.”<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere one of Plaatje’s preoccupations is himself and his own behavior. As for some other diarists it provides him with an opportunity to assess his own performance and behavior, whether this was in the context of work or against a yardstick that encompassed moral and religious values. He very much enjoyed interpreting in the court of summary jurisdiction (since “they transact a lot of business in a very short time”) and responded eagerly to the particular challenges this posed, his efforts and expertise appreciated by his superiors. But on several occasions he arrived late for work, causing him to reflect as follows. “This lateness appears to be a disease with which I am infected and I will see it does not occur again as I feel very uncomfortable in consequence.”<sup>21</sup> An insight, perhaps, into one aspect of a moral code that was deeply internalized, reinforced, it seems reasonable to assume, by an upbringing on a Christian mission station and over six years in the Cape Civil Service.

So one can indeed suggest, in the light of this, that Plaatje did use his diary to help shape new forms of identity for himself, drawing from past memories and present circumstances to create a new literary persona. This was rooted firmly in his being, but it was the diary and its conventions, and his knowledge of them, that dictated its particular form.

## Silences

Any diary is selective, and often things that are not said can be as revealing as things that are. Of course when the diary itself is the main source of information about the experience it records it can be difficult to know what is left out. In Plaatje's case, however, some evidence exists about several significant episodes which he chose not to write about, or to write about only in a very perfunctory manner, which suggest that there were some well defined limits to what he was prepared to commit to his diary.

The first episode was that of the supposed deposition of Wessels Montshiwa, the Barolong Paramount Chief, on the last day of December 1899. Baden-Powell had taken exception to his "general unsatisfactoriness" and wanted him removed. Charles Bell was present at the meeting arranged to give effect to this, and wrote in his diary that its purpose "was to tell Wessels, the Chief, that we would conduct business with his counsellors, in future, instead of himself."<sup>22</sup>

Plaatje, whom one might have expected to interpret at the meeting, is surprisingly reticent in his diary. He says only that "The Colonel and Civil Commissioner were down to settle an issue amongst the Chiefs," and that "the cause of the trouble was of course Thelesho" [i.e. Wessels Montshiwa]. But he makes no comment about his own involvement in the meeting as an interpreter, while his subsequent remark that "we called in at 7 pm" well after the proceedings had finished (and by which time the Chief was "half-way at his cups and had a great many objections to make") leaves no doubt that he had been absent from the morning's proceedings. An interpreter of some sort certainly was there (according to Angus Hamilton), but it must have been somebody else.<sup>23</sup>

Modiri Molema, however, in his 2012 biography of Plaatje—and present himself during the siege—throws some revealing light on what did happen. Plaatje, he recalled, had refused to interpret at the meeting when its purpose was made clear. He was interpreter in the magistrate's court and not at the chief's *kgotla*, and he was not prepared to compromise his integrity by participating in his deposition, whatever the chief's personal shortcomings. Plaatje had his own mind, Molema said, and would not be forced to do things that he did not think were right: here, it seems, was a line he would not cross. In Molema's words, he was not a "seraba" (a bag of charms) that his employer could use to make him translate phrases from one language into another, nor could he be played at will like a "serankure" (a single-stringed bowed musical instrument). Only the Barolong themselves had the right to depose their chief, not an imperial military officer in temporary authority over them.<sup>24</sup>

The second matter about which Plaatje is conspicuously silent are the executions (six or seven of them according to official records) of Africans found guilty of theft or spying for the Boers. Plaatje was expected not only to interpret at their trials in the Court of Summary Jurisdiction but also, so Modiri Molema recalled, at the place they were then brought for execution. It was a harrowing ordeal, and Plaatje was deeply affected by the experience.<sup>25</sup> One such execution was on 25 January 1900, but Plaatje does not mention it in his diary, nor does he have anything to say about the attempts he made—recalled later by another well-to-do Morolong by

the name of Joseph Gape—to appeal to the authorities to reprieve the condemned man. The appeal fell on deaf ears, Gape recalled, earning the comment from Charles Bell that all Plaatje had “inherited from those German missionaries was their absurd benignity and nothing more.”<sup>26</sup>

In March there were two further cases. In the first a man by the name of Hendrik Botetle was sentenced to death for stealing a horse belonging to Silas Molema, in whose house Plaatje was of course living. Plaatje simply says in his diary, “the horse thieves sentenced”; he did not say what the sentence was, nor that in the case of Botetle it was carried out two days later.<sup>27</sup> Two weeks later there was another similar case. This time Plaatje was pleased to be able to record in his diary that Colonel Hore had refused to agree to a conviction since the soup kitchen had failed to provide the accused with any sustenance, and he first wanted its failings investigated. However, Hore either changed his mind or was overruled, for two days later the unfortunate prisoner was sentenced to death and immediately executed.<sup>28</sup> Again Plaatje had nothing to say about this, for his entry of 30 March was the last he wrote.

There is no way of knowing whether it was the particular circumstances of this case that caused Plaatje to abandon his diary. But it is certainly possible that this was so, and it would be consistent with an interpretation that saw the diary as a medium that was no longer capable of reconciling the persona Plaatje had created with the reality of the experiences he now faced. For a while he got by through omitting what he clearly found unpalatable, painful though he may have found it to continue with it. By the end of March, however, it seems that he could no longer do this. The reality of his day-to-day experience, and the conflicted situations in which he found himself, could no longer be reconciled with the demands of a genre he had embarked upon nearly six months earlier. His diary, to put it another way, depended upon a level of consensus between the different elements of the persona he had constructed: when this no longer existed, when English could no longer bridge the gaps between them, keeping up a diary was no longer a possibility.

### Concluding thoughts

This paper has suggested some ideas about ways of looking at Sol Plaatje’s *Mafeking Diary*, moving from a focus on what it tells us about the siege to a plea for closer look at the text itself and at the social and intellectual world of its author. At the same time I suggest that the particular form and conventions of the diary, and Plaatje’s evident familiarity with these, influenced the language he chose, the ways in which he used it, and how he presented himself. He was not so much constrained by the conventions of the genre as empowered by it. Rather, he made use of its flexibility and exploited its capacities to the full, using it for a variety of purposes. Above all, it can be argued, he used it to give shape to a particular view of the world, to demonstrate—to himself if nobody else—that his memories, his experiences, his observations, his views, provided as valid a frame of reference as anybody else’s, not least that of his white fellow citizens in Mafeking who were likewise busy putting pen to paper. In doing so he displayed a remarkable degree of self-confidence and precocity for one so young. We can never know for sure why he ceased writing his diary at the end of March 1900, six weeks before the end of the siege. My

suggestion, however, is that he reached this decision because it was just too painful for him to continue with it: as conditions deteriorated, his diary was no longer capable of reconciling the conflict that arose from the heightened tensions between his role as a servant of the government and being part of a wider African community. At that point his diary was expendable. “I have never felt better in my life” may have been how he felt in February: a month later things were very different.

## Notes

1. “Mafeking,” in today’s North West province of South Africa, was a colonial corruption of the Setswana name “Mafikeng.” Today, following changes in orthography, this is rendered as “Mahikeng.” In this article I have adhered to “Mafeking,” as used by Plaatje in his diary.
2. All references in this article are to the 1999 edition of the diary: John Comaroff and Brian Willan (eds.), *The Mafeking Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* (centenary edition), Cape Town: David Philip, 1999. The manuscript of Plaatje’s diary, along with some other papers, remained in the hands of Plaatje’s family and descendants after his death in 1932. There is no evidence that either Plaatje, during his lifetime, or his family subsequently, made any effort to get it published.
3. It does not get a mention, for example, in the extended introductory survey in Judith Coullie et al. (eds.), *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. The recent *Cambridge History of South African Literature* has a brief assessment of Plaatje’s diary in the chapter headed “Perspectives on the South African War” but it falls outside the period of the earlier chapter dealing with memoirs and journals in the Cape (1820s to 1870s) and merits only a mention in a footnote in the later generic chapter dealing with “Confession and autobiography” (David Attwell and Derek Attridge (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
4. Vivian Beckford-Smith, “African Nationalist or British Loyalist? The complicated case of Tiyo Soga,” *History Workshop Journal*, 71, 2011, esp. p. 76.
5. Plaatje mentioned on 8 February 1900 that he was by this time typing Bell’s diary (along with those of Dr Hayes and Capt Greener) (*Mafeking Diary*, 108). However, he included an extract from Bell’s diary in his own on 26 October 1899 so he clearly had access to it at that point, most likely for purposes of typing it out (*Mafeking Diary*, 45).
6. Rebecca Steinitz, *Time, Space and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 2.
7. “The South Africans Improvement Society,” *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 23 August 1895, quoted in Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje 1876–1932*, Auckland Park, Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018, 6.
8. Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 69.
9. See particularly Steinitz, *Time, Space and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century British Diary*, 116–30, and Martin Hewitt, “Diary, Autobiography and the Practice of Life History,” in David Amigoni (ed.), *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, esp. pp. 24–28.
10. Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 50. Plaatje’s “style of reading and pronunciation,” according to the Secretary of the Society, was “fairly criticized,” while “the mistakes corrected did not only benefit the reader, but also the other members”.
11. From his “A South African’s Homage,” a contribution to Israel Gollancz’s tercentenary *Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916), reproduced in Brian Willan (ed.), *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1997, 210–12.
12. One such example is from his diary entry on 7 December 1899 where he is reflecting upon the impact of “Au Sanna” upon the inhabitants of Mafeking: “Their soliloquies

- were so far retrenched by the perilousness of their position that in their cogitation there was only room for the one word “God”; and they yearned for the company of his angels more than they cared to meditate sin. But now we have so far forgotten ourselves as to imagine that this failure was attributable not to providential protection but to Cronje’s misfortune and our good luck, or to his cowardice and our valour—what an odd notion.” The “exodus” metaphor is from his entry for 27 February 1900 (122–4).
13. *Mafeking Diary*, 122 and Jabavu’s English-language editorial in *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 23 April 1896, 3.
  14. “siqu” and “isiqu” are referred to respectively on 18 December (p. 70) and 6 February 1900 (p. 105); “makasono” appears in his first entry, 29 October 1899 (p. 28). See also John Comaroff’s comments about Plaatje’s use of these languages in the original edition of the diary (John Comaroff (ed.), *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973, xxvii–xxviii).
  15. Passages dictated to David Phooko are listed in *Mafeking Diary*, 164, where a sample page of his handwriting is reproduced. Confirmation that this handwriting is that of David Phooko is provided by comparing it with several of his later letters relating to his employment by the Cape Civil Service which have survived in the Cape Archives. Plaatje’s reference to his “low estate” is from his entry on 24 December 1899 (73) where he corrects David’s rendering of his dictation.
  16. *Mafeking Diary*, 12.
  17. Plaatje and Phooko’s working together on the diary bears comparison with collaborative forms of letter writing on the part of black migrant workers: see Keith Breckenridge, “Love Letters and Ammanuenses: Beginning the Cultural History of the Working Class in Southern Africa 1900–13,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26.2, June 2000: 337–48.
  18. Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, 8.
  19. *Mafeking Diary*, entry for 5 January 1900, 90.
  20. *Mafeking Diary*, 146.
  21. *Mafeking Diary*, 44.
  22. Baden-Powell’s version of the “deposition” of Wessels Montshiwa (he considered his “general unsatisfactoriness” arose from “having no authority over his people, being also generally drunk or ill”) is from his Staff Diary (National Army Museum, London), entry for 31 December 1899, while Charles Bell’s is from his diary (Cory Library, Rhodes University), entry for 31 December 1899, 81.
  23. *Mafeking Diary*, entry for 31 December 1899, p. 81; Angus Hamilton, *The Siege of Mafeking*, London: Methuen, 1900, 197. Hamilton’s account was first published in *The Times*, 20 March 1900, six weeks after the event.
  24. Seetsele Modiri Molema, *Lover of His People: A Biography of Sol Plaatje*, translated and edited by D.S. Matjila and Karen Haire, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012, 35–6. In his original manuscript Molema gives the date for this as January 1901 but from his description there can be no doubt that he is describing what took place on 31 December 1899 for this was the only recorded occasion of its kind, and Bell had in any case left Mafeking by January 1901.
  25. Molema, *Lover of His People*, 34–5.
  26. Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, 124, quoting Gape’s letter to *Koranta ea Bechoana*, 6 December 1902.
  27. *Mafeking Diary*, 132; Botletle’s fate is confirmed by Colonel Vyvyan in his diary entry for 12 March 1900 (Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, Vyvyan Papers, B34).
  28. Details of Malhombé’s fate can be found in Brian Willan (ed.), *Edward Ross, Diary of the Siege of Mafeking October 1899 to May 1900*, Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1981, 206, and British Library, Weil Papers, Add. Mss 46849, no 179, note from Lord Edward Cecil to Baden-Powell, 30 March 1900, re “death warrant of loafer of whom I spoke to you”.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Brian Willan* is a historian and former publisher, currently Extraordinary Professor at Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley; North West University, Mahikeng; and Senior Research Associate, Rhodes University. Since completing a PhD at the University of London he has written widely on Sol Plaatje and other aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century South African history and literature. He was co-editor (with John Comaroff and Solomon Molema) of *The Mafeking Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* (David Philip, 1999), co-editor (with Bheki Peterson and Janet Remmington) of *Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa* (Wits University Press, 2016), and co-editor (with Sabata-mpho Mokae) of *Sol T. Plaatje: A Life in Letters* (Historical Publications Southern Africa, 2020), an edited collection of Plaatje's correspondence.

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