‘[Shake?] at Royal Force’: British and Colonial soldier’s letters from the Boer War (1899-1902) and what they can say about Imperial and National Identities.

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The Relief of Ladysmith, 1900 by John Henry Frederick Bacon (Public Commons): The Second Boer War was fought in South Africa between the British Empire and the two ‘Boer’ states- the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. The Boers were the descendants of Dutch colonists who had been successively pushed out by the British. The opening years of the war was a complete disaster for the British Empire and a huge hit to its prestige globally as the two tiny Dutch states, who lacked professional armies, ground imperial forces to a halt and inflicted humiliating defeats on the British.
Soldier’s letters from the Second Boer War (1899-1902) occupy a rather niche place in its historiography, usually being pigeon-holed as representative of only one limited section of society (those in military service abroad), who shared an experience uncommon to the majority of their contemporaries. So while they have been used extensively by military historians in a very limited capacity, such as Edward Spiers to assess the impact the war and its conditions had upon soldiers, their potential role in facilitating an understanding of broader societal and cultural issues has largely been ignored and social historians have been slow on the uptake to utilize them. They certainly have not yet been applied to inform theories on imperial and national identity of the late Victorian and early Edwardian eras. This article will not be able to correct this gap necessarily, but it will seek to show at the very least how soldiers’ letters are a valuable source for more than just military history. They can complicate established arguments on imperial and national identities such as the (in)famous Porter-Mackenzie debate, while also providing the framework for a reinterpretation of ‘British’ as a shared imperial identity for English and Scottish soldiers, as perceived by themselves and colonial troops.

To facilitate this the article will be split into four interlinked sections of what the letters can tell us of the conception of an imperial identity, Racial identity, National Identity and the Monarchy. British and Canadian letters have been used though the primary focus is on British identity with colonial perspectives providing supporting evidence. It makes use of roughly 200 letters from the British Library Archives, British Newspapers Archive, The Canadian Letters and Images project and Edward Spiers Letters from Ladysmith to inform its findings.

Victorian soldiers were prodigious letter writer’s courtesy of a 92 percent literacy rate in Britain by 1900, thus we have many surviving examples. This is helped too by the fact that the recipients of these letters tended to share these letters, often without the writer’s permission, to newspapers for publishing publicly. This means not only are most letters fairly well preserved in original or printed form, but as there was no mail censorship

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1 E. Spiers, Letters From Ladysmith: Eye-Witness Accounts from the South Africa War (Johnathon Ball, 2010).
during the Second Boer War, and as they are not written with a public audience in mind, but to a trusted confidant with who they were liable to be more honest and open with about their true feelings and thoughts, these letters provide a fantastic source for getting to know the ‘real’ and mostly unfiltered individual.

Much of the content of course is mostly family gossip, or quite surprisingly, extremely detailed descriptions of their battles which they sent to their mothers.\(^4\) This rather interesting find adds a new dimension potentially to the traditional views on Victorian gender roles and spheres. However, to discern evidence that might inform us of the writer (and their recipients) conception of identity can be difficult. It is rare for a soldier to openly declare to the recipient a sweeping statement of how exactly they view themselves, their nation and the empire (Though for future reference, historians dearly wish they had, so bear that in mind when writing your letters and emails please). Also, in the case of the published letters, typically only those the editor of the newspaper liked, or which were positive or newsworthy, found there way into the papers pages.\(^5\) More than this though, as the rather tongue-in-cheek title of this essay references, the simple matter of reading these letters, on cracked paper, with blurred, or entirely missing ink presents a significant challenge to historians in the archive attempting to use them. For those not in on the joke, the squared brackets around ‘Shake’ denote that this word was almost impossible to read and so is a ‘best guess’ by yours truly.

Due to this and the sheer amount of letters I have read, the evidence used here will merely be a selection of letters deemed to provide the most interesting perspectives on identity that were usable without having to rely on too much of my own deduction and that go beyond the expected and indeed consistent jingoistic reference to war as a pleasurable game.\(^6\)

\(^4\) British Library, London, Add MS 39558, C.A. Lafone Letters from the Boer War 1899-1901, 28 January 1900 and February 12 1900. The earlier letter is to Lafone’s mother and the later to his father. He describes the combat in detail for both.

\(^5\) Karageorgos, ‘Never again’, 105-6.

\(^6\) Epitomized by a letter in the North Devon Herald, 15 March 1900, 8, ‘The Boer As A Fighting Man’. In which the solider describes ‘beating the Boer at his own game’ as a ‘lively pleasure.'
A ‘British’ Imperialism: Were the British indifferent to the empire?

The Second Boer war (1899-1902) was undoubtedly an Imperial venture in the literal sense. It involved forces drawn from all corners of the British Empire, eventually amounting to roughly 336,000 Imperial troops, supported by 83,000 Colonial soldiers. Its cause was also imperialistic in its nature. Contemporary commentators have taken differing views on who or what was at fault for the war, their reasoning ranging from a moral imperial duty to spread the benefits of British civilization to the far corners of the world, to the perception of the war as a post-child for Britain’s economically exploitative imperialism, with the

8 H. Wilson, *With the Flag to Pretoria* (Harmsworth Brothers, limited, 1900), 4.
empire being marshalled and hurled at a region in an effort to gain new resources and sources of investment to keep the capitalist class happy.\textsuperscript{9}

While the soldier’s letters will not necessarily contribute decidedly to the weight of such structural debates about the nature of British imperialism, they can show what contemporary soldiers thought they were doing in the wider context of an imperial war which contained all manner of imperial troops. In turn this can give an eye-witness insight into if there was such an awareness of an ‘imperial culture’ and identity as argued by John Mackenzie,\textsuperscript{10} or if Bernard Porter was correct to argue in contrast that most ordinary British people were entirely indifferent to the empire, with an awareness of imperialism lacking ‘deep roots’ in British society.\textsuperscript{11} Thus their being no such thing as an active ‘imperial identity’. This debate has raged on with both historians gathering ‘schools’ for their perspective points.

As the soldiers who fought in the Second Boer war were drawn largely from the lower classes, and their officers were predominantly middle class they would have all been born, raised and lived in the same cultural environment that Mackenzie argues was absolutely ‘steeped’ in an imperial culture, which he argues would have profoundly shaped their self-identity. Evidence for Mackenzie’s position can indeed be found amongst the letters. For instance, a letter sent to the Aberdeen Free Press (probably by its recipient given it was originally dated 27 October but published 4 December 1899) which was from a Henry Burgess who served on an armoured military train from Mexborough sheds light on their being an awareness of empire and the conception of an imperial identity to the average person. The date of the letter, and that it is from Ladysmith raises the possibility he served on the train constructed at Ladysmith, South Africa prior to the sieges start.\textsuperscript{12} In the letter he states ‘Our troops are unanimous in their declaration of colouring the whole map of South Africa red’.\textsuperscript{13} Red was the colour commonly used to depict the British empire on maps

\textsuperscript{9} J. Hobson, \textit{The War in South Africa: It causes and effects} (James Nisbet and Co, Limited, 1900), 233.
\textsuperscript{11} B. Porter, \textit{The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain}, (Oxford University Press), p.4.
\textsuperscript{12} Pakenham, \textit{Boer War}, 95-6.
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and so there is a clear imperialistic pride displayed here and an awareness that Britain’s territorial ownership is positive thing and that it should be extended as much as possible. It is thus worth fighting and potentially dying for. This clearly highlights the imperial culture Mackenzie purports indeed existed. While of course Burgess is perhaps overexaggerating by claiming to speak for the other soldiers too, as a crewman on a troop-carrying train he would have come into contract with troops from many different British regiments and so may indeed be speaking loosely as to the attitude of his fellows too.

If his is indeed the train from Ladysmith, it is made clear in its Captain’s autobiography that Burgess would have met with at least the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, The Durban light infantry, who are South-African loyalist unit\(^{14}\) and a gun-crew from HMS Tartar.\(^{15}\) This means that at least such an opinion is potentially shared among Irish and South African Soldiers and British sailors. A fact that shows that all parts of the empire seemingly shared an awareness of an imperial dimension to their identities, which they positively connected with. They saw the empire as worth expanding and fighting for and that participating in the Second Boer War was a part of this.

Moreover, as Burgess is a ‘fireman’ on the crew,\(^{16}\) he is likely to be from the working class. Generally, much of the army was working class due to as Anne Summers argues the poor conditions of service and the low prestige the army was seen to have by contemporary Victorians (The Navy was seen as a far more respectable institution to join).\(^{17}\) Thus, his awareness of an Imperial identity complicates the picture for Bernard Porter’s sweeping claims that the working classes, despite their education which emphasized aspects of the empire, and the existence of popular working class ‘imperial’ events, were essentially apathetic to the empire due to a lack of evidence of their endorsement.\(^{18}\) The addition of such soldier’s letters would provide affirmative evidence to the existence of positive imperial support, both among the soldiery and potentially the working and middle classes

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\(^{15}\) A. Haldane, A Soldier’s Saga, the Autobiography of General Sir Aylmer Haldane (W. Blackwood, 1948) 140-47.


\(^{17}\) A. Summers, ‘Militarism in Britain before the Great War’, History Workshop, 2 (1976), 108-110.

\(^{18}\) B. Porter, The Absent-Minded Imperialists, Empire, Society and Culture in Britain (Oxford University Press, 2005), 208.
which is reinforced by the fact that local and national newspapers are choosing to publish these letters, which implies there was a popular interest back home too. The Aberdeen Free Press for instance, was a popular and cheap daily liberal-leaning newspaper in Aberdeen, purchased by the working and middle classes, and from its success it’s clear it had a large-audience. It chose to print Burgess’s letter, after being passed on by a family member who clearly approved of its contents themselves, show a wider awareness of an imperial identity and a positive connection to it were something its readers would be familiar with.

Similar expressions of imperial identity from the Second Boer war can be found in other letters. For instance, a letter written on 27 March 1900 and published in the Stround Journal, the local newspaper for a small market-town in Gloucestershire bears the thoughts of Wallace H. Wood of the Army Medical Corps. He states that the dying men in his charge are ‘heroes’ who have ‘saved the Empire’ and indeed because of them no foreign country would dare wage war again as the ‘Empire is one in deed, as well as in name’. As a non-commissioned officer, he too is ‘working class’ and seems to believe in the empire with his outlook clearly being heavily shaped by its existence. The war is justified in his view as it enhances the empire’s power by displaying its unity to the world. This showcases the emphasis some soldiers clearly put upon this facet of their identity. The reference to ‘hero’ also supports Berny Sebe’s argument of the popular existence of British imperial hero-worship, as there is an awareness from Wood of the existence of a heroic tradition where those in Imperial Service can be placed and perceived by their peers, and it’s expected future generations, in a positive light. Even if this is merely Wood being upset at the losses suffered during the war, the fact his first call is to justify it in imperial language shows how deeply ingrained an imperial element to identity is among soldiers as they fall back on it to justify the deaths of their comrades and countrymen.

The views of Canadian soldiers provide further support to the existence of an overarching Imperial identity. These men tended to be nearly all volunteers specifically for the Boer war and thus there is great level of civilian/domestic crossover present in their

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beliefs. George Launchberry Dore was one such volunteer, who signed up in 1899 specifically for the South African war. He reassures his mother ‘I am going to fight for the British Empire’. This implies that he considers this important enough that his mother would be comforted by it, which indicates an awareness of, and pride in, an imperial identity both in him, but also among his family at home.

So far we have seen that these soldiers from Britain, Canada and beyond are all there specifically for the British Empire and all hold a straight-forward view of it as a positive force that it is something to be protected and expanded, even at the cost of their lives. However, it is important to note that reference to imperial identity is few and far between. Of the 200-odd letters viewed there is scant reference to imperialism. Indeed, in the around 40 letters written by Dore alone, imperial identity is only referenced this once. This does not necessarily mean it was not important, merely that private letters intended for friends or family would not necessarily emphasize abstract issues such as identity or politics, instead being filled with gossip and personal news. Likewise while we have a large collection of surviving letters, this is still just a fraction of the amount that has been lost, both due simple source attrition over time, but also as the Boers frequently captured British mail. With this in mind that an imperial identity is referenced at all in the surviving letters, even in varying circumstances shows at the very least there must have certainly been a wider awareness of it among the soldiers, their families and the wider public in Britain and its colonies.

23 Dore, George Launchberry Letter: 1899 December 26 (https://www.canadianletters.ca/document-62157?position=0&list=iU52g8XtB8krKm3mxPqXXUom135VaQXJPn1O-kl4m8g, Accessed 20 December 2019).
24 Tresham, Alfred Chapman Letter: 1900 June 24 (https://www.canadianletters.ca/content/document-8808?position=7&list=a_JFxHi5AwVIvp7dM0TbbSpTqh1iBbrTV5CBWw7uU, Accessed 18 January 2018)
References in the letters to race complicate though any too neat an idea of the existence of a definitive and overriding pro-British empire, patriotic imperial identity among the soldiers. The identity of anyone is complicated, with multiple layers- for instance someone can be proudly English, but also see themselves as British, they may also have roots among other nations. The part of their identity they choose to emphasize may change over time and depending on situation, identities can and do co-exist within individuals.

The same is clearly displayed here, as far from soldiers being one-dimensional supporters of the British Empire and being defined totally by it, viewing its enemies as the ‘others’ we actually see a lot of sympathy expressed to the Boers, based primarily on their ‘race’. Colour-Sergeant Lee writes of an awareness of the Boers as fellow ‘white people’.
Upon encountering a wounded Boer his heart is ‘touched’ he explains due to this.\textsuperscript{25} This supports David Cannadine’s argument that a racial hierarchy existed in Victorian Britain, with a conception of a white race at its pinnacle. However, it also complicates his point that the pinnacle was reserved for merely the British as it’s clear ‘whites’ in general are of importance to Lee in a way that crosses national boundaries.\textsuperscript{26} This is further seen in a letter by W.A. Weir, an Intelligence Officer who believed that peace in South Africa cannot be achieved until ‘all white men are... on an equal footing’.\textsuperscript{27} Here there again is no preference for specifically British Whites. While these are only two letters of the many read, Lee is a Staff-Sergeant and thus working class, while as an Intelligence Officer it is likely that Weir received a greater degree of education to perform in his role, seen with his more complex reasoning. This places him potentially among the middle classes. There is potentially then an inter-class pan-national concept of ‘Whites’ being essentially all equal that transcends British imperialism and nationalism. This evidence again highlights the issues historians like Cannadine face when tackling identity as it complicates the neater arguments, we as historians like to make.

The inclusion of the Boers into conceptions of the ‘white race’ also shows the influence, or lack there-of, of writers such as John Seely who promoted a white-Anglo-centric vision of identity and Empire.\textsuperscript{28} Specifically because it appears these soldiers at least, prefer to expand Seely’s conception beyond merely an Anglo version, by instead including the Dutch Afrikaners. However, an Anglo-centric belief can be seen in some letters like Trooper H. Clifton’s, where he lists that Britain’s colonial and American (Both ‘Anglo’) soldiers all agreed with the notion of ‘British Supremacy’ in South Africa and implies it’s good to see these ‘white-faced’ Anglo peoples fighting alongside one another.\textsuperscript{29} There is a clear Anglo-centric notion of supremacy here on the model Seely purported as the Boers, who were also white are not included, indeed there is perhaps a nuance that they are not ‘white’ or at least not the same level of ‘white’ as the Anglo-Saxon British and Americans. That the letter is published in the Auckland Times by its recipient also highlights the

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\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Totnes Weekly Times}, 30 December 1899, 8, ‘Letter from a Dartington Man’.
\textsuperscript{26} D. Cannadine, \textit{Orientalism: How the British Saw Their Empire}, (Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Middlesex County Times}, 14 April 1900, p. 2, ‘The Ladysmith Pigeon Post’.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Auckland Times and Herald}, 23 March 1900, 5, ‘News from the Front’.
\end{flushright}
likelihood Clifton is a colonial himself, coming from New Zealand. Similar Anglo ‘exclusivist’ racial views can be found in a Canadian letter by Robert Robinson in which he describes the ‘black population’ as a ‘natural… slave of the whites’, but despairs that the Boers are lazy and do not use them properly.\(^{30}\) The implication being here that the white Anglo/British subjects would be far better suited to the role than the white Boers of ruling over South Africa’s black population.

The colonial verses British comparison of attitudes here tentatively could imply that those from Britain itself, were often, though not always, far more open to the concept of their being a shared ‘white’ affinity with those who were not of the so-called ‘Anglo race’, perhaps due to their proximity to Europe which included a variety of ‘white races’ (as they saw it at the time). Meanwhile, the greater exclusivity among white colonials (those people from the empires dominions specifically) lends support to Porter’s view that the settler colonies were essentially more racist due to a lack of direct British Imperial control.\(^{31}\) The colonials were allowed to mostly govern their own affairs domestically and had far more direct contact with a greater number of people of colour who they had special privileges over, and in comparison to. This is merely tentative support for Porter’s argument however as there was only a total of four letters with any reference to the topic of race.

Notably though for Britain this does complicate further questions of identity. Particularly when Linda Colley’s theory of the necessity of the ‘other’ (found in Europe usually) to British identity to define it properly is applied (It defines it by offering it a base of comparison- i.e. being British is not being or behaving like the French).\(^{32}\) The appeals in the above letters to their being a shared ‘white race’ emphasizes that there existed for some British people at least a pan-national identity that contradicts the need for the existence of an ‘other’ for them to rally against.

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\(^{30}\) Robinson, Robert S. Letter: 1900 August 3 (https://www.canadianletters.ca/content/document-34?position=1&list=saiv0wTdsNttQYzKAv-a42EguDJZX-kD6-25CCpfFXc, Accessed 4 January 2019)


However, to show just how complicated the history of identity can be, Linda Colley’s theory is also in fact partially validated in these letters as while the usage of the term ‘British’ is not presented as needing an ‘other’, it does have imperial connotations for English and Scots reminiscent of a shared project.\textsuperscript{33} This is the exact thing Colley argues that ‘British’ is- a constructed identity, sort of reminiscent of a fresh brand name of two newly merged companies (in this case Scotland and England) that are embarking upon offering a new product together (a jointly created and run empire).

Among the soldiery from the British Isles the term appears to primarily be used as a short-hand reference to collections of troops from Britain, minus the Irish. These are the

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, 326.
core imperial nations of the empire. Sergeant Shirley of Tamworth, serving in the King’s Royal Rifles, an English regiment, referenced the ‘British pluck’ of those soldiers involved in the battle he was in. The regiments that he was specifically referencing was the Durham Light Infantry and Scottish Borderers as well as his own King’s Royal Rifles. It is also noted that when attacking together they gave a ‘British cheer’. For the Scottish a letter from Private John Henderson of Perth serving in the Gordon Highlanders uses the term ‘British soldiers’ to refer to the wounded during the Battle of Spion Kop. The wounded contained his own as well as several regiments from Lancashire. Between Britain and Scotland at least there is this interplay then of both using the term ‘British’ when English and Scottish troops are present together, to describe themselves and their comrades in arms.

This use of British is reinforced by the terms the soldiers use when there is not the inclusion of another ‘British’ nation (Scotland, Wales or England). To use Sergeant Shirley again, when it comes to referencing an attack by the Durham’s and his own regiment, he notes that an ‘English Cheer’ is given. The lack of Scots making all the difference to him apparently, as now he talks about regiments from just England, the term ‘British’ is dropped and ‘English’ becomes used instead. The specific noting of this change shows a clear awareness that ‘British’ as a term includes Scottish troops too, and thus is a reference to Scotland and England, while without them ‘English’ is the primary national identity.

Indeed, the Scottish Corporal Matheson when singling out and talking about a specific company fighting ahead of his uses ‘English’ instead of British to denote its national identity. The awareness among the constituent nations of Britain of each other’s nationalities implies the viability of historians arguments for an ‘inner empire’ existing, such as those found in Krishan Kumar’s work, as the English clearly have a separate national identity underneath their imperial ‘British’ one. This also appears to be something that the Scots recognize and do themselves. Where Kumar’s argument is complicated by this evidence is in his contention that ‘English’ was a ‘non-national’ identity that held no real

34 Lichfield Mercury, 23 March 1900, 5, ‘The Capture of Vaal Krantz Kop’.
36 Lichfield Mercury, 23 March 1900, 5, ‘The Capture of Vaal Krantz Kop’.
37 Highland News, 21 April 1900. 6, ‘Letters from the Front’ in Spiers, Ladysmith, 78.
38 K. Kumar, English and British National Identity (University of Virginia, 2006), 439.
meaning, as it’s clear there is a very specific difference between a ‘British cheer’ and ‘English cheer’ for instance. Mainly the lack of kilts. It is here that Colley’s argument for the need for an ‘other’ could work, not for the British identity, but for the English one as being ‘English’ quite clearly means not being Scottish.

‘British’ as a founding nations imperial identity (i.e. being an overlay to Scottish, Welsh or English) is further highlighted by Canadian Noble John Jones’ reference to the ‘British’ using mortars, he does not mention ‘we’ or ‘our’ as might be expected if ‘British’ was a wider imperial identity. In a subsequent letter he explicitly refers to his fellows as ‘Canadians’, showing that he sees ‘British’ as a separate identity, one which Canada is affiliated with, but separate from. Thus, when Canadians like Dores mentioned they were going to fight for the ‘British Empire’, they do not perceive it is they who own it- that privilege they give to the English and Scots, but they are Canadians, a dominion of this empire, and they are serving in it, and arguably occupy a privileged position within it compared to other colonial subjects.

The Irish question

Linda Colley’s argument that the Irish are perceived as alien ‘others’ in a way that English, Scots and Welsh do not perceive each other, is fully supported by these letters. It is highlighted by their non-inclusion in the soldiers use of ‘British’. They are always listed separately, even when they are spoken of with affection, as seen in a Sunderland soldier’s letter marking them as ‘our brave Irish brigade’. While the possessive tone denotes a fondness and camaraderie for the Irish, the possessive word ‘our’ is conspicuously absent from the letters where Scots and English discuss one another as ‘British’ in an equally camaraderie fashion. There is thus evidence for a distanced ‘colonized’ aspect to the

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43 Daily Post, 11 April 1900, 3, ‘The Relief of Ladysmith’.
perception of the Irish among the ‘British’, as the Irish are ‘possessed’ by the British as part of their ‘inner empire’. Even Canadian letters differentiate the Irish from the ‘British’. This perhaps indicates an awareness as argued by George Boyce of the Union being one of negotiated partners between the Scottish and English, while the Irish were a coerced party. Certainly, they are not grouped as part of ‘founding joint-imperial nations’ (England, Scotland and Wales)- the British, among contemporaries.

The existence then of ‘British’ as an imperial identity for the ‘Founding joint-imperial nations’ can be quite safely argued. This adds further emphasis to Mackenzie’s overall argument that Britain was ‘steeped’ in imperialism, particularly as there is a clear imperial-element to being ‘British’ that is widely understood. Porters rebuttal to this that of course those like soldiers who served in the empire would have a greater awareness of it as part of their identity does have some merit to this study, but can be countered by the fact that using these letters, it is not just the soldiers writing amongst themselves, they are using terms, concepts and words that would be familiar to those back-home receiving their letters, and of course newspapers are publishing these to the wider public at local and national level. So, it’s clear the specific usage of terms like ‘British’, ‘English’, ‘Scottish’ and ‘Irish’ where appropriate would be relatable in their usage to the general public.

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For the Monarchy? Attitudes around the Empire to Britain’s ruler

A specific element of the British imperial identity though can and was shared by all those in the empire, the Irish included- the British Monarchy. The presence of the Monarchy in these letters speaks to the core points present in Cannadine’s work on the monarchy that it was framed as an important imperial and national unifier in the later 19th Century, providing stability for Britons, Canadians, Australians et al at a time of increasing doubt and unrest. In a series of letters written by Captain Claude Alexander Lafone of the 2nd Devonshire’s, we see in a mention to his mother on October 26 1899, that he has a great

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expectation that the Boers will ‘[Shake?] at Royal Force’. Jones for the Canadians echoes this when thanking the dependence those from home put in him ‘for... our Queen’. There is thus a clear awareness among the soldiers and their contacts at home that the Monarchy occupies a central place in all their identities, be it Canadian, British or indeed English. Lafone from his obituary in a 1915 ‘Roll of honour’ in the *Middlesex Chronicle*, is a professional soldier who served continually from 1897. Jones on the other hand is a Canadian volunteer who signed up in 1900 for just one years’ service. It is thus not simply that the monarchy is important to serving soldiers, but also is a key part of the identity of people who are essentially civilians.

It is evident though that there is a difference in how important this association with the Monarchy is for them that perhaps speaks to the different natures of patriotism that can coexist in a nation or empire. For Jones it is noted that by 18th September 1900 he is decidedly against renewing his service as he is ‘too fed up on this job for anymore campaigning’, he is thus sporting a very different attitude to military service than earlier in the year, clearly service to the monarchy and empire has its limits.

It wasn’t just civilians from the colonies though who felt this way. Volunteers from Britain also shared a similar perspective, as seen with Dan White of the 2nd Bedfordshire Rifle Volunteers (again not a professional soldier) comment in June 10th, 1900 who wrote that they have ‘all had enough of it.’ While undoubtedly this is partly due to the gruelling nature of the war, it may also highlight the jingoistic domestic context in which these men had volunteered and its short-lived nature. Just as the Conservatives 1900 patriotic ‘Khaki’ election needed more than calls to patriotism for them to win, so too was patriotism to the monarch and empire a short-term incentive for service. By contrast the professional
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soldiers make no such complaints, though as always it might merely be these letters missed out those that did.

Certainly, though the seemingly limited nature of patriotism among short-term volunteers supports Summers’ interpretation of Britain having a liberal volunteer ‘militaristic’ society, where volunteers were relied upon (and never found in short supply, even if they didn’t serve long) that was very different from the reliance on conscription found in the militarism among the continental powers.\(^{54}\) It also highlights that the general public had a different conception of military service than the professional soldiery. The former saw it as a heroic chance to serve at a particular crisis point for the empire, hence why their letters are filled with enthusiasm for the conflict, followed by disenchantment after they’d served a while and the horrors of the war were better understood. While for the latter, while it was still a ‘service’ to the empire, they saw it as a long-term profession and thus seemed a ‘caste apart’ to their civilian counterparts.\(^{55}\)

**Conclusion**

That professional soldiers might be seen as a ‘caste apart’ epitomizes the central limitation when using soldiers’ letters to inform broader identity debates. Their experiences were arguably atypical to the rest of the population. These were the men who for whatever reason experienced the ‘empire’ abroad. While the Boer War had many volunteers that somewhat counteract this issue, it was also arguably a comparatively rare individual who volunteered abroad (However the later First World War would show volunteering in Britain was fairly widespread as an activity). However, it would be stretch to claim that those being engaged with empire had no domestic footprint, their recipients at home clearly understand, if not share their perspectives, and again papers published letters that audiences would find interesting and relatable.

\(^{54}\) Summers, ‘Militarism’, 105.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 108.
The other limitation of this article’s findings of course is that for a more sustainable and stable argument, far more letters than the 200-odd viewed would need to be analysed. For instance, this essay ignores the experiences of Welsh soldiers, due to the surviving Welsh letters viewed displaying nothing of relevance to this article. Many soldiers’ due to writing with a private audience in mind simply assumed the recipient knows the particulars of their character, circumstances and perspectives and thus felt no compulsion to write it down. This is not to mention the appalling condition of most letters, many are missing sections, or often even ink. There is however huge potential here for a historian of identity who is tenacious, to use soldiers’ letters from the Boer War fully test current arguments around Victorian national and imperial identities as well as build their own picture.

This is not to mention the added benefit that the Boer War itself is uniquely placed in history as a major imperial venture which had a large jingoistic drive of support in the British empire at its outbreak especially as there were growing fears of imperial decline if Britain stopped expanding, both these things, the jingoism and the declinism was stoked by the ‘new media’ of mass-printed newspapers which had mass appeal thanks to high literacy rates. It thus is the perfect case study for historians interested in identity, with easily accessible sources, with a mass audience and a time which amplified the hopes and fears of those within the British empire that can bring contemporary discussions of identity to the fore.

So, despite these limitations, I hope this analysis is an example of what is possible when the Second Boer War and its soldiers’ letters are investigated from more than just a military perspective. It was by no means an exhaustive analysis, and yet it still manages to complicate and weigh in on several key arguments about national and imperial identity which historians have, while also putting forward a tentative outline for the concept of a ‘British’ identity as an exclusivist imperial identity for the English and Scottish that existed alongside their national identities, and was used when both nations were present together, by themselves and by other colonial subjects like the Canadians. This thus, draws upon aspects of several historian’s points while complicating them. It highlights the usefulness of previously ignored soldier’s letters as a lens into the complex world of British identities.
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