

# B(L)ACK-GROUND AND FOREGROUND

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'A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS,' or so the saying goes. The inheritances of this phrase are attributed to a number of sources, including an ancient Chinese proverb, Napoleon Bonaparte (who remarked that 'a good sketch is better than a long speech') and, more accurately it seems, to Fred R Barnard, in the advertising trade journal *Printers' Ink*, on 8 December 1921 (which carried an advertisement entitled, 'One Look is Worth A Thousand Words'.) The inherent meaning of these statements is powerfully evoked in photographs of *Zuid Afrikaansche Spoorwegmaatschappij* (NZASM) infrastructure, completed in the late 1800s (i.e. 1883 to 1900) in the then *Zuid Afrikaanshe Republiek* (ZAR)

'The formation of the NZASM was

necessitated by the increase in economic activity in the ZAR, after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand. The massive competition for rail transport charges, between the various republics, had by then already set in motion attempts by the ZAR to seek independent access to a seaport' (Barker, 2014:113). The company was established around 1890 and set about the construction of a number of railway lines – most important being the Eastern Line from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay (now Maputo), which was completed in 1894.

Unlike the instant electronic images of today, the bromide photographs of the 1890s are staged, requiring time and effort to organise. These images, taken before railway infrastructure was completed and shortly before the outbreak of

the Anglo-Boer War or second Boer War (1899-1902), subtly capture the state of relations between so-called 'whites' and 'blacks' during the presidency of Paul Kruger. On one hand, they express the hierarchy, importance and status of 'white' individuals and the sublimation of black labour, but on the other they capture a sense of common purpose through the inclusiveness of all individuals involved in NZASM work. Similarly, they tell of possible pacts between local inhabitants and 'foreigners', imbuing a sense of camaraderie and mutual protection. They also, indirectly, acknowledge the contribution of the substantial 'black' labour force that was used to construct the railway lines, bridges and supporting infrastructure. 'In April 1899,



the successor to the Chief NZASM Engineer of Middelberg, Jhr J A van Kretschmar van Veen, who had left at the end of 1898, had under his control a staff of 1 770 Netherlanders and ex-Netherlanders, 4 477 South Africans (of whom 3 700 were black<sup>1</sup> and 777 white labour) and 1615 representatives of 26 other nationalities. (<http://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/archframes.php?archid=1184>)

The grainy images tell us little of the inheritances of the workers or the consequences of railway construction on their lives. Where did the ‘black’ labourers come from, were indigenous inhabitants displaced during construction work, and how did they fit into the politic dispen-

sation of the day and the administrative structures of NZASM?

Recently, Professor Karel Bakker (1955-2014), in his chapter ‘The Departement Publieke Werken’ in *Ecelectic Wilhelmiens – a shared Dutch built heritage in South Africa*, provides a glimpse of the labour context of the times. He notes (2014:70) that the 1870 Constitution of the ZAR continued the legacy of control and management of black labour, devised and tested in the Cape Colony and on the Kimberley mines, but expressly precluded citizenship, while the Native Taxes and Vagrancy Law controlled Africans and ‘coloured’ persons inside the Republic. In 1871, a commission on African labour in the ZAR was set up by the *Volksraad* to respond to complaints regarding the lack

of subservience. They had to investigate petitions pertaining to native servants and native laws (Bergh, 2002:41). However, ‘the dispossession and displacement during the previous 32 years, of Africans by white settlers in the Transvaal was, of course not on the agenda of the 1871 Commission’ (Bergh, 2002:43). In fact, the report was never published as there were many complaints against Paul Kruger himself (Bergh, 2002:41). It was only in 1881 that the system of slavery and/or indenture of Africans was abolished through British pressure but, as Bakker notes (2014:70), the position of black labour remained ‘precarious, exploitative and oppressive’. Although chiefs of tribes such as the Pedi, Swazi, Venda, Tswana and Ndebele were allowed to govern their people and retain possession of much of their land, they were also forced to pay kraal taxes. The black chief Malaboch and his followers, who were based in the North-Eastern Transvaal, refused to be conscripted as they had no political rights in the ZAR (Muller, 1984:288). Notwithstanding, the NZASM infrastructure would never have been so speedily completed had it not been for the availability of ‘black’ labour. As evidenced by photographs taken at the time, it is important to note that ‘any current definition of cultural significance of the industrial capital landscape and built environment of the ZAR must include the African contribution’ (2014:71).

A subjective reading of NZASM photographs, taken between 1890 and 1900, reveals a number of hierarchical relationships between ‘black’ and ‘white’ workers. These range from master and servant to comrade and sometimes even protector. Although the Dutch forged good relationships with the local tribes, they harboured a hidden agenda in that without the assistance of ‘black’ workers, the extensive NZASM infrastructure would not be possible. To maintain control, the

1. ‘Blacks’ in ‘traditional’ loin cloths pushing ‘white’ official in formal attire at the Kaapmuiden station on the Eastern Line (from Pretoria to the then Delagoa Bay in Mozambique)
2. White NZASM and black workers at their camp
3. ‘Whites’ in the front, with François Felix van der Rijst, station master of Machadodorp and Waterval-Onder (1890-1900) in the centre and leaning against the pole; ‘blacks’ in the background but in formal attire and standing
4. Camp of NZASM personnel, most likely at Komatipoort on the Eastern Line, with an array of shelters including ‘traditional’ framed and reeded structures (De Jong, 1990 4(2):54)
5. Black workers under white supervision constructing new footings for the flooded Kaap River bridge

<sup>1</sup>De Jong et al (1988:?) indicates that there were 7 000 Africans in the employ of the company



strict hierarchical structure of NZASM personnel (De Jong, 1989:249) was extended to the ‘black’ workers.

This subjugation is most often visible in a master and servant relationship. Workers are seen seated on the hard gravel, while NZASM officials proudly stand on level building platforms. Sometimes, workers are organised with military precision, while their overseers stand nonchalantly and haphazardly. The most telling role is that of action versus stasis where, for example, a relaxed NZASM official in formal attire is pushed on a railway cart by near-naked workers in loin cloths. Similarly, but in less overt terms, surveying assistants are partially hidden behind staffs and tripods while their NZASM bosses take the foreground. It is this visually controlled relationship that permeates many of the bromide images.

‘Black’ workers are most often ‘dominated’ by being placed below, behind or off centre of their ‘white’ bosses. But the hierarchy extends even further. Workers are often exposed to the harsh climatic conditions, while their bosses languish under roof overhangs. The lowliest of ‘black’ workers wore almost nothing, no doubt to be able to work in the sometimes unforgiving weather, but their clothing certainly reinforced the Dutch perception of them being the ‘children of nature’. Even when workers were dressed in second-hand formal attire, it was to achieve a sense of ‘decorum’ while they fulfilled the role of servant in their master’s house.

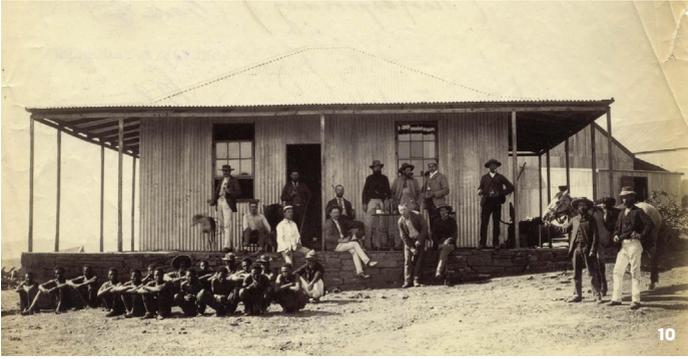
‘Relatively little is known about accommodation for black NZASM personnel. It appears they were housed in mostly thatched-roofed rondawels’ (De Jong, 1990:58) and huts in kampongs near station precincts (De Jong, 1989:107,119). These structures were certainly much more temporary than the brick and stone, and even prefabricated, houses of the ‘whites’, and smacked of an ‘indigenous temperament’ borne out by statements contained in the 1871 ZAR Commission, which noted that ‘T Erasmus, who had been a Field-Cornet on the Apies River, told the Commission: “I think the more harshly a native is treated, the better he will do his duties.” For Field-Cornet HP Malan, “[T]he more freedom one gives a native, the worse it is. He should, however, not be treated too harshly.” In connection with his beating of Kgamanyane Pilane, he said: “[T]he beating made him less cheeky.”’

But these sentiments were not wholly representative of the, perhaps, naïve feelings of some Afrikaners and NZASM personnel, who sought control over the locals. Bergh (2002:58) indicates that in the same report, PJ van der Walt commented: ‘[I]f the natives could be divided amongst the [white] people and they would not run away, I would think this would be good.’ Erasmus explained it as follows: ‘[M]y idea was to make every native serve a master and have him live on his land and not let him live in kraals.’

During their tenure, NZASM immigrants had uncomfortable socio-cultural

relationships with both the British and the Afrikaners. They regarded the latter as ‘corrupt, lazy, dirty, know-alls, drunkards’ while their religious displays were ‘merely pretence’. However, according to De Jong (1989:197), their relationship with ‘black’ inhabitants was, on the whole, good as a result of ‘little previous experience and ingrained assumptions’. They saw the indigenous peoples as ‘children of nature’ requiring their sympathy and education, albeit with a little patience, so that they could become valuable workers for the company. Some NZASM personnel even learnt to speak a ‘black’ language (De Jong, 1898:198). Through this seemingly respectful relationship, many of the ‘black’ workers began to dress in the formal attire of the railway personnel. These were often hand-me-downs; De Jong (1989:198) describes the items as having seen better days.

But the inclusion of ‘black’ workers in photographs tells us something of the close relationship that NZASM officials built up with local or imported inhabitants. The strict hierarchical relationships previously seen were replaced by a sense of camaraderie, as ‘black’ and ‘white workers stood together in their base camps or at stations such as Maraisburg. An extension of this partnership was the sense of protection illustrated at the Kaap River bridge site. Here, ‘white’ officials were seemingly protected by ‘black’ workers, who had their assegais poised. Previous positional hierarchies seem to have disappeared,



with all workers and personnel taking on a middle-ground position. This implies the recognition of an equal contribution to the work of NZASM.

‘An extant, but oftentimes unnoticed, NAZSM legacy dots our South African landscape as a testament’ (Barker, 2014:133) not only to the work of the managing personnel of the NAZSM but more importantly to the ‘black’ workers who toiled in harsh conditions to speedily complete the railway infrastructure. It is their intangible input that has left the country with a physical legacy that quietly contributes to current economies and daily life. The bromide images have foregrounded their contribution to this legacy, providing credence to Karel Bakker’s postulation that ‘any current definition of cultural significance of the industrial capital landscape and built environment of the ZAR must include the African contribution’ (2014:71).

• In the article ‘Architecture for life: exploring regenerative & resilience thinking’ (ASA Jan/Feb), Dr Barker’s name was incorrectly spelled. We apologise for the error.

- 6. ‘Whites’ standing and ‘blacks’ in overalls sitting at Elandsfontein Station, ca 1895
- 7. Black and white NZASM personnel near the bridge on the Kaap River, ca 1892
- 8. A partially clad assistant working on the Caretaker’s house in the KM 150 area
- 9. Partially clad black worker preparing the river bed for the construction of new footings for the Kaap River bridge
- 10. Woning by Elandsspruit

- 11. A group of NZASM officials in front of the hut of the district engineer at KM 16, Komatipoort, in 1893. Note the servant to the left, in the background
- 12. ‘Blacks’ in traditional dress at Maraisburg Station, seated, and surrounded by ‘white’ officials with some ‘black’ officials in formal attire at the rear
- 13. Personnel of the land-surveying department at the house on the Pampoenspruit, Elandsvallei, KM 221

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