

THE LADY IN WHITE: BRITISH IMPERIAL LOYALISM AND WOMEN'S VOLUNTEERISM IN SECOND WORLD WAR DURBAN

Jonathan Hyslop (Colgate University and University of Pretoria)
jhyslop@colgate.edu

Abstract

Perla Siedle Gibson, known as 'The Lady in White', was an upper-class woman from Durban, who in the Second World War became famous for appearing in the city's harbour and singing to the numerous British and South African soldiers and sailors who passed through. The article shows how Gibson's activities illuminate several aspects of South Africa's, and especially Natal's, role in the war. The strategic situation in the period 1940–3 made South African ports crucial to the British campaigns in North Africa and East Asia. The article demonstrates that women's volunteerism in Durban played a key part in sustaining military morale in this period, and thereby contributes to a gendered reading of the politics of the war. It also emphasises the specificity of Natal settler loyalism in framing the activities of Gibson and her co-workers: white Natalians had a particularly strong sense of connection to Britain, and an ambivalent relationship to the South African state. Finally, the article points out how racial tensions were building in this period, in ways which would lead to internal crisis in the country and international isolation by the 1960s. This would ultimately undermine the Natal-British identity for which Gibson stood.

Keywords:

The Lady in White, Durban, Second World War, troopships, Britishness, Natal Separatism

From mid 1940 until the end of the Second World War, British soldiers and seamen who sailed into the South African port of Durban were likely to be greeted with a strange spectacle. Standing on the quayside would be a woman in her fifties wearing a long white dress and a broad-brimmed red hat and clutching a megaphone. In a trained soprano voice, she regaled them with patriotic songs.¹ Sometimes she would be surrounded by a host of other locals, from amongst the city's white British loyalists. William Pennington, a bluff and conservatively minded officer who had come up through the ranks in the British Indian Army, recalled such an arrival, with (slightly prurient) enthusiasm, more than half a century later: "The population gave us an incredible reception: the quays were crowded by civilians in their hundreds, who had arrived with their cars – and their daughters – to greet the convoy". The vocalist was Perla Siedle Gibson, who in the war years became known internationally as 'The Lady in White'. On BBC radio and in the pages of *Time* magazine she was to be acclaimed for her contribution to the allied war effort.² And

there is no doubt that her impact on the servicemen was a real one. Pennington wrote: “Perla – who lost one of her own sons in the war was reputed to have sung ... to a thousand troop ships and more than three hundred and fifty naval ships We were far away from home and for all we knew, we would never return to our loved ones and our homeland. For a while, her songs took us home. The Lady in White was a great morale booster, she was idolized throughout the Armed Forces”.³ After the war Gibson was guest of honour at numerous veterans’ gatherings in the UK. Her reputation lasted long after her death in 1971. When in 1995, the Queen visited South Africa on the occasion of the country’s readmission to the Commonwealth, a statue of Gibson was on the quayside next to the royal yacht *Britannia*.⁴

Gibson has been a difficult figure for historians to take seriously. In his excellent overview of South Africa in the Second World War, Bill Nasson treats her as marginal, eccentric and benign, “a dignified and homely crooner ... Managing to be both stirring and sentimental ...”.⁵ I want to suggest however that Gibson’s life can be an important lens through which we are directed to a broad and serious set of historical issues. In this article, I will consider what that life tells us about the role of South Africa in World War II, about Natal settler loyalism and its racial ideologies, and about the highly gendered politics of the management of wartime commitment in South Africa and across the British empire. I will also seek to show how the micro-politics of events around Durban harbour reflected the strains of a nation and an empire in crisis.

Durban at the outbreak of war was southern Africa’s greatest port, having already permanently overtaken Cape Town and Delagoa Bay in that role by the 1920s. It was a city of about a quarter of a million, of whom the formally – but not always actually - segregated African, Indian and White components comprised about a third each. Whites were overwhelmingly English-speaking and largely of British descent – about a fifth of them having been born in the UK. Afrikaners were a very small minority amongst whites. The African population was hugely disproportionately male, and lived mainly in labour barracks, on employers’ premises or in the burgeoning squatter camps on the edge of town. There was a very substantial Indian working class, mainly of Tamil and Telegu origins, and a predominantly Gujarati-descent group of merchant families concentrated especially in the Grey Street area, who played a key role in the retail economy.⁶

In September 1939, the then Prime Minister, J.B.M. Hertzog, had proposed a path of neutrality for South Africa. His cabinet colleague, Jan Smuts, opposed this line, won a parliamentary vote for participation on the British side, and formed a government. In South African historiography, the Second World War has until recently been treated as tangential to the main story. For Afrikaner nationalist authors the war served simply as yet another example of Smuts’ subordination of the interests of the *volk* to those of the Empire. African nationalist writing tends to dismiss the conflict as a white man’s war. Liberal and Marxist scholarship has often treated the first half of the 1940s as a continuation of long term directions in the South African polity, narratives either of the rise of resistance politics, or of how the policies of the Smuts

government were both a continuation of earlier forms of segregationism and the prelude to the imposition of apartheid in 1948. There has also been little consideration of the extent to which South Africa's involvement in the war might have had any effect on the wider conflict, outside the boastful claims of South African military enthusiasts. However, it is now becoming clear that it is indeed useful to ask whether the war might have been of greater significance to South Africa.

Saul Dubow has made an important challenge to the idea that the Smuts government was simply the forerunner of apartheid.⁷ Dubow showed that, while Smuts had no intention of conceding full political rights to Africans, the war years saw liberalization of a range of repressive political practices and the participation in government of liberal and leftist officials who introduced significant reformist social programmes. In the economic sphere, a highly interventionist approach toward the market produced outcomes that were in many respects egalitarian. In this perspective, the Smuts years appear as a significant erosion of previous racial policy, and the politics of Malan's nationalists as more of a rupture, consequent on relatively conjunctural factors of the mid-forties, rather than as a continuation of tendencies developing under Smuts. I would however want to take Dubow's argument further in two respects. Both of these relate to what I think is a tendency in Dubow's otherwise admirable analysis to neglect the semi-autonomous effects of military power. Firstly, the condition of wartime emergency and the re-linking of the South African state to the military networks of the British Empire were the factors that enabled the Smuts government to cut through the normal parameters of local white politics. Secondly, the significance of South Africa's role in the war is best understood at a geo-spatial level. The Smuts government's raising of about a quarter of a million combat and non-combat troops, creation of an effective air force, and setting up of war industries were all notable achievements. But they surely weighed relatively little in the balance of the titanic military and economic scale of the war. The real importance of South Africa's participation lay in the role of its ports. The decision to go to war really became globally significant in mid-1940, when Italy entered the conflict. This resulted not only in the British position in Egypt coming under threat from the Italian colony in Libya, but also in the virtual closure of the Mediterranean to British merchant shipping. Consequently, Churchill personally instituted a project to supply Egypt and bases east of Suez via a round-Africa route. This necessitated the use of Cape and Durban harbours. Between June 1940 and the full reopening of the Mediterranean route in mid-1943, this operation involved 55 massive convoys, carrying nearly one million two hundred thousand troops.⁸ Moreover, when the Royal Navy lost control of the north-east Indian Ocean in the early stages of the Japanese war, the South African ports took on an increased importance in naval and supply operations in relation to the Asian theatre. During 1942 and early 1943, three German and one Japanese submarine offensives were launched on British shipping off the southern African coasts, and the small but competent, newly-created South African seaward defence force proved important in countering this threat to the convoys. Durban also became the base for the British seizure of Madagascar in May 1942, which forestalled a possible Japanese

occupation of the island.⁹ All of this was only possible because of South Africa's belligerency. Had Hertzog been in power, the British maritime resources in southern Africa would have been limited to the quite small Royal Navy harbour in Simonstown. On Durban dockside, Gibson was dramatising South Africa's strategic role in the conflict. She was literally standing at the most important spatial intersection between South Africa and the global war, making her own claims about what that link meant.

Gibson was in her time the most visible representative of a distinctive strand of South African political culture, namely the passionate identification with the British Empire that one might call Natal Loyalism. Quite some time ago, Andrew Thompson drew attention to way in which historians of South Africa – in sharp contrast to their Australasian counterparts – had largely ignored the loyalist phenomenon.¹⁰ Despite some notable subsequent contributions since – especially by John Lambert¹¹ – the same could largely still be said. Especially neglected is the crucial question to which Thompson pointed in his essay, that of the local and regional contexts of loyalism. In Natal, loyalism had a history and meanings quite different from in the rest of South Africa. Even at the time of the South African War, Natal was famous for the fervor of its imperial attachment. Reluctantly forced to join the new South African state in 1910, Natal loyalists had notions of a special connection between themselves and Britain. Loyalism was not of course either exclusively the property of those of British descent, nor of whites: there were still in Natal, as late as the 1940s, 'moderate' African and Indian leaders who were emotionally and politically attached to the British connection.¹² But during and after the war years, such leaders were under pressure from a younger more radical generation. Loyalism was slowly shrinking toward its white, Anglophone core. Importantly, white Natal loyalist politics had, at least as early as the 1890s, often been connected to a toxic hostility toward the Natal's Indian population, initially driven by white workers' fear of labour market competition and retailers' resentment of Indian merchants. There was a strong, although not universal, association between white loyalism and separatism and anti-Indian politics for the next half century. This combination of British loyalism and the sense they were inadequately protected from Indian economic 'threats' made white Natalians sceptical of Smuts. When he visited the city in 1942, the Prime Minister was pleasantly surprised when he had a successful meeting at the City Hall. He noted that "my old opponent the *Natal Mercury*" said that "Natal was at long last reconciled to me", but, Smuts wondered, 'For how long'?¹³ His anxiety about his support in white Natal, led Smuts to support a series of discriminatory measures against Indians, especially in relation to land ownership, which were to provoke a significant international backlash. Thus Natal political dynamics meant that Smuts' politics in relation to the Indian community showed less evidence of the partially liberalizing tendency that manifested in some other policy areas.

Gibson's case highlights that white Natal loyalism was not entirely, or perhaps even primarily, produced for a local market. The whole point about being a loyalist was that one wanted the metropolis to know about one's loyalism, for the hope was that

recognition from the centre would provide status and influence for the outpost. Gibson's songs were directed largely toward a British audience, and demanded the solidarity of that audience.

Gibson work was consciously aimed at the strengthening of commitment to the war. Recent historiography has moved the intangible, but enormously important question of how what is unsatisfactorily called 'morale' is sustained, to the center of military history. Most writing on the topic focuses somewhat narrowly on soldiers as opposed to sailors and civilians; and emphasizes one or more of four factors - effective training; small group loyalty; ideological commitment and fear of punishment. And probably those factors do indeed count most at the actual moment of the clash of arms. But this seems a somewhat limited band of concerns in understanding the long-term endeavor of holding armies together over a period of years, in which much time is likely to be taken up with routine activities. Some recent studies have started to point to the importance of questions of material daily life and emotional satisfaction in preserving military capability, even in periods of combat.¹⁴ Moreover, it is strange that studies focus of military morale rather neglect civilian populations, whose ideas and actions are surely crucial to the mentalities of their military family members and friends.¹⁵ We need to take much more seriously, the effect of the material and emotional support provided to troops by volunteer workers, and in modern history the bulk of such work has been done by women. Gibson's own work can be understood as part of a particular element of this, namely emotional labour, managing the potentially volatile internal states of troops on their way to, at, and from the war zones.¹⁶ The remarkable short and long-term impact she had points to the need for a broader understanding of the production of morale.

Gibson's work needs to be placed in the context of a remarkable and historiographically neglected mobilization of South African women for the war effort. Afrikaner nationalism placed a great deal of ideological emphasis on women's role in the Nationalist movement, celebrated the heroism of women in the Boer War, and created a considerable amount of organizational space for women's activism. There was also some tradition of voluntarism amongst white Anglophone women. In general though, this all remained within a strongly conservative emphasis on domesticity. Prime Minister Hertzog had only given white women the vote in 1929, and then mainly because this racialized franchise would offset the surviving voting right for Coloured men in the Cape. Thus, when in 1939 Smuts supported the establishment of the South African Women's Auxiliary Service (SAWAS), which not only became a branch of the armed services but also mobilized a wide range of women's civil society groups for war related work, it was a notable and politically fraught development. Its ideological ripples stirred a considerable political tension in the SAWAS world between those who saw the moment as one that was the harbinger of a more egalitarian future and those who were anxious for a return to pre-war 'normality'.¹⁷

Most studies that exist of wartime women's voluntarism focus on specific countries. But Gibson's activities also suggest the need to explore its pan-imperial dimensions.

While Perla devoted a lot of attention to South African troops, they were not her only, or even her main, audience. She worked mainly to support the imperial forces. If the British war effort was in part sustained by female voluntarism, it drew not just on the labour of women in the United Kingdom itself, but also of that of women in the dominions and colonies.

The Siedles of Durban

Behind Perla's imperial stand on Durban dockside, was the history of her family and the very remarkable positioning that it gave her in relation to the very making of the harbour, and to the construction of the city, of capitalist relations in the region and to the South African state itself. There was a long trajectory which made Perla Siedle Gibson, and not anyone else, into the so-called Lady in White. Her father, Otto Siedle, had been born in London in 1856, to German immigrants from the Black Forest. The family had done well in England, establishing a successful jewelry business in Woolwich. Otto spent some time in Germany as an apprentice. After returning to London, and still in his teens, he had been offered a job in Durban as assistant to a local shipping agent. Arriving in Natal in early 1883, Otto was a great and rapid success. He became part of a young group of retailers, landowners and merchants in the town, who were to become very influential in its economic development. After the colony was given white self-government in 1893, some of them became important political actors. This group was instrumental in the driving the transformation of Durban's unpromising lagoon into a modern harbour, in pressuring the colonial government to raise finance for a comprehensive rail network into the interior, and in developing a coal industry. These initiatives laid the groundwork for Durban's emergence as a premier maritime city.¹⁸ Perla was to recall the thrilling visits to the harbourside of her childhood, creating an emotional identification with the place that she never subsequently lost.

Over the years, Otto accumulated substantial and permanent wealth as a shipping agent, coal owner and manufacturer. However the local bourgeoisie of which he was part were to experience a process of relative marginalization, and this, I would suggest, lay behind the intensity of their loyalism. Despite their success, Durban's capitalists, as a group, failed to get in on the ground floor of the Rand gold boom. They found themselves economically dwarfed by the fortunes of Johannesburg. So when in 1909, Natal was under economic pressure to join the proposed South African Union, they faced the prospect of being reduced from being big players within a small polity to a minor force within a much bigger one. Moreover, the small scale of the British immigration to Natal and the demographics of the proposed new state meant that any party representing them would be likely to be overrun at the polls by a largely Afrikaner electorate. Durbanites sought a federalist solution, but failed to get one, and were forced into the unitary state. White Natal sentiment was to remain un-placated and very hostile to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. In 1926-7, white Durbanites resisted the introduction of a new national flag, defiantly displaying a giant Union Jack across the whole front of Durban City Hall, a building which was, appropriately, built as an exact replica of that of Ulster Loyalist Belfast.

In the early 1930s, in a development paralleling similar events in Western Australia, separatist politics, driven by the Great Depression, became a serious phenomenon. Shortly thereafter, when Smuts joined a coalition under his antagonist Hertzog, a section of Smuts' followers under Colonel C.F. Stallard broke away, accusing the General of betraying the imperial connection. Stallard's Dominion Party found serious support only in Natal, and its stronghold was in Durban.¹⁹ The political environment out of which Perla came was then one in which her family and peers clung to British identification for reassurance in a world which they perceived as highly threatening.

The Siedle family's German background added an extra layer of complexity to the question of their Britishness. After it became clear that the young Perla had considerable musical talent, she was sent in 1907 to Berlin, for voice training. She adored the city and was successful in her studies, giving a number of public performances. She was also a social success, making friends with a Lady in Waiting at court and being invited to a number of royal events. Perla stayed in Germany for two years before returning home.²⁰ But when World War One broke out, Durban became a very bad place to be German. In 1915, a riot orchestrated by a coterie of local notables burned a number of allegedly German-owned businesses in the city to the ground.²¹ Then, Perla's brother Karl was killed by serving with the British Army in France. It is hard not to speculate that this complex relationship to Germany must in some way reinforced the intensity of her British identification.

When Perla married and had a family, she used her wealth to establish herself the leading cultural patron of the city. Her husband, a wool merchant called Jack Gibson, built an elaborate house, on the Berea Ridge overlooking the harbour. (Jack overextended himself financially, but Otto bailed them out). In the interwar years, the liner-borne circuits of actors, musicians and sports stars between Britain, southern Africa and Australasia were extraordinarily dense. The Gibsons hosted theatrical and musical notabilities of the calibre of George Bernard Shaw, Sibyl Thorndike, Clara Butt, and Yehudi Menuhin. There were also family connections to the highest levels of imperial sport. The clock tower at Kingsmead test cricket ground was named after Karl; Perla's brother Jack was a star batsman on the 1929 and 1935 South African cricket tours of England; and brother Basil played Rugby for the Springboks against the All Blacks.²² For Perla this added up to an experience of membership of an imperial cultural world, realised in the artists and sportsmen passing through her living room. All of this was made possible of course by the platoon of domestic workers.

Women Volunteers and Durban Harbour

Perla's role in harbourside voluntarism went back to the First World War. At that time, there was a considerable legacy of anxiety about the connection between the wartime presence of soldiers and sailors, and accompanying prevalence of drink and vice in the city, from years of the Boer War. In the 1914-1918 period, Durban's administrators sought to ward off a repeat of this experience through closing bars

when troopships were in town and shutting down brothels. To give support to visiting troops, women volunteers organized a welcome programme from soldiers and seamen, greeting them at the docks and providing a canteen and YMCA facility.²³ As elsewhere in the Dominions, there was a strong tendency for women's war work to be led by the upper classes.²⁴ Perla and her mother Amelia had participated in the canteen service. Also involved was one Ethel Campbell. The Campbells were the Siedle's next door neighbours. The patriarch, Sam Campbell, was part of a prominent sugar dynasty.

Durban in the First World War was an important stopping place for Australian and New Zealand troopships taking soldiers to the battlefields, and the ANZACs had a fearful reputation for mayhem. Ethel Campbell, though, became the public face of hospitality to these ill-regarded visitors, visiting and feeding them when they were confined to ships and welcoming hundreds of them at the family home. She took to appearing in a white sailor suit on the quayside and signaling to incoming ships with semaphore flag, often asking 'Are there any Australians on board?'. She also produced a body of poetry in praise of the Australians. Ethel became something of a cult figure in the Australian press, which acclaimed her 'The Angel of Durban'. When she and the Campbell parents travelled to Australia in 1923, Ethel was met by rallies of ex-servicemen and received by political leaders.²⁵

It seems evident that Ethel provided the template for Perla's Second World War role. The phrase 'Lady in White' has little apparent connection with its likely origin in Willkie Collins' mid-Victorian thriller. Rather 'White' evoked notions of purity and home. The mythology around Ethel centred on the story that she had lost a boyfriend in the war. But whereas Ethel's self-fashioning was based on youth and vulnerability, Perla's was maternalist. What they had in common was the evocation of domestic nostalgia, for men entering a zone of radical uncertain. They were white in different sense as well. Ethel, Perla and the white upper and middle class women who worked in the harbour canteens, were freed up to do what they did by the employment of African domestic labour. The ladies in white were also white ladies. It is not entirely true to say that these African workers were invisible; they do appear at the margins of their narratives around harbour voluntarism. But just as the importance of women's voluntarism is sidelined in most narratives of the war, the work of rightless colonial subjects which made that voluntarism possible is then also pushed to the edge of that story.

Perla's Second World War role actions took place in a much wider context of women's mobilization for war, led by the South African Women's Auxiliary. Although Smuts, who strongly backed the organization seems to have primarily seen its benefits in terms of freeing up men for combat, SAWAS carved out its own role. Members undertook a wide range of war work, from routine office duties to driving trucks in the war zone and operating the defensive gun emplacements at Durban and other harbours. Although SAWAS was a military organization, a major part of its work was in mobilizing civilian women in a huge range of war-related activities. It organized projects such as the Hospitality Scheme, in which visiting British and

Commonwealth servicemen were hosted in houses all over the country. Another notable initiative was the Gifts and Comforts Fund, which sent packages of luxuries to servicemen. A crucial role was played by Smuts' wife. Issie Smuts was a complex figure, one of the few college-educated Afrikaner women of her generation, but positioned by her nickname, *Ouma*, as the archetypal Afrikaans grandmother. As President of Gifts and Comforts, she worked with great devotion, becoming immensely popular with the white South African troops. Although primarily aimed at white women, SAWAS created well over a hundred voluntary working groups amongst women of colour as well, targeted as supporting soldiers from their communities.²⁶ The scale of voluntarist support for the war was astonishing. In 1943, a Navy Week initiative run out of Johannesburg to collect for naval and merchant navy personnel and their dependents raised nearly £ 250, 000.²⁷

Durban was a special focus of harbourside voluntarism. A key role was played by the Anglican Missions to Seamen (MS), headed by the hyperactive Reverend Stanley Smith, but staffed largely by female volunteers. Smith's efforts were informed by a strong sense of social conscience, and he constantly stressed the need for a collective recognition of the grim work of the seamen. The volunteers operated out of a club building, erected before the war, in Wellington Road on the Point, which had extensive social and catering facilities. Smith was notable, in the xenophobic white Durban context, for his empathetic work for Indian seafarers. But given the constraints of the racial politics of both the British merchant navy and white Durban, this was carried out on a segregated basis. In 1942, Smith's efforts led to the opening of a club for Indian seamen in Shepstone Street.

The Mission's volunteers put on numerous sports events, visited ships and hospitalized sailors and served hundreds of thousands of meals. They organized regular film shows, and occasional plays for the sailors, and distributed masses of reading material. The Mission offered religious services but did not seek to impose on non-believers. The volunteers supported the numerous shipwrecked sailors who arrived at the port, most of them victims of submarine attack, and often suffering from wounds or exposure. Smith buried many sailors at Stellawood cemetery. In 1942 alone, about 230 000 sailors (including 30 000 Indian seamen) used the MS clubs. Most evenings some form of entertainment was offered and these events were attended by 79 000 white and 25 000 Indian seamen over the course of 1942.²⁸ The MS set up a 200 bed hostel for Royal Navy ratings, and opened the Convoy Inn, for seamen awaiting onward transport.²⁹ Schools, and especially girls' schools, were mobilized in the cause: Perla's *alma mater*, Durban Girl's College, 'adopted' *H.M.S. Moonshine*.³⁰ The Mission received strong financial support from inland, especially from fundraisers in Johannesburg and Maritzburg. The work was undoubtedly emotionally draining. For example, Smith was distressed to report that of the 150 men who attended the Christmas dinner given by Mission in 1940, 63 died the next year in the sinking of the *Empress of Asia*, during the British collapse at Singapore.³¹

It was this world of voluntarism that provided the platform for Perla's activities. The Siedle family had a strong interest in the Seamen's Institute, a charitable

organization for seafarers. Otto was, at one time, President of the organization and raised a certain amount of money for it.³² Before 1939, the Institute had started planning a dockside canteen for merchant sailors. With the outbreak of hostilities this plan was adapted to one for a more general canteen for military personnel. According to Perla, her new persona emerged spontaneously one day in mid-1940, when she was working on the canteen. Men on ship of departing Rhodesian troops headed for East Africa called on her to sing and she responded. This canteen provided the organizational back up for her subsequent activities.³³

Perla embodied Natal's British loyalism. To her, the names of the Royal Navy's ships, passed down the centuries, were 'the drumbeats of history', their crews 'the heirs to the heroes' of Trafalgar and Jutland. Her generation was of course raised on the notion of British naval power; it embodied Britishness. She felt deeply the fact that no less than 16 of the Royal Navy ships she sang to went to the bottom during the war.³⁴

What exactly did the work of Perla and the female volunteers she represented actually achieve in sustaining the troops who passed through Durban? There is no doubt that morale, especially in the North African theatre was a serious problem for the imperial forces. For most of 1942, the Eighth Army experienced an acute crisis, manifested in an extremely high level of absenteeism without leave.³⁵ Troops felt that German generalship and equipment was superior. In many cases, especially amongst South African soldiers, there was a lack of confidence in their officers. A major issue for the troops was their fear about the faithfulness of partners back home. While it is impossible to measure the impact of Perla and the women volunteers in this situation, it seems evident from both contemporary responses, and later ones, that in the absence of the kind of emotional and material support they gave, the task of moving vast armies around the world, and their social management during that process, would have been even harder to carry out, socially and psychologically. One soldier later wrote to her,

...suddenly, out of Durban's pier
Something white, dazzling clear
A woman's voice just cries 'love'
Loving warm soft sympathy".³⁶

In Perla's memoirs there is a disconcerting degree of self-awareness of the ideological effect she produced. She was quite conscious that she was projecting a reassuring and unthreatening image of the mother for the troops, and that they would experience this as reassuring. Her conduct perhaps makes a case for emphasizing self-reflexivity – the idea that people are often more aware of the social practices within which they operate than social scientists give them credit for. Yet she also disowned personal responsibility, claiming cosmic inspiration for what she was doing, in a way that recirculated the maternalist ideology she projected. When singing to the troops, she wrote, "I had a completely detached feeling – what I was doing emanated not from me but through me. I was doing something as

instinctively and naturally as a mother would a child. It was a destiny I was born to fulfill".³⁷ There was an element of real grandiosity at work in how Perla's thinking developed. In her memoirs she quoted to her readers a Scottish soldier who told her, in 1963, that "to us you were the mother of all men as you sang us along our way".³⁸ She picks up on the phrase "it seems as if that highlander was right: that I at a certain moment in history became in my small way, 'the mother of all men'".³⁹ Similarly, she stated in her autobiography that "I believe that I was ordained by Providence to fulfill this particular wartime task".⁴⁰ The ideas may appear absurd, but they were absurdities that really worked; they gave her absolute certainty about her mission.

Perla's effect would have been undermined had she not been backed up by a huge volunteer apparatus providing more material forms of support. Durban and places beyond fed, housed and entertained the men on a sumptuous scale; South Africa had largely escaped rationing. Pennington was entranced by "the hospitality of those wonderfully generous South Africans".⁴¹ Such gratitude enabled the building of a strong local sense that Durbanites were internationally at the forefront of support for the war effort. Reverend Smith was able to claim that "the people of Durban have now a reputation second to none for their fine hospitality".⁴² This sentiment flattered white Durban's self-perception as the most loyal of colonials.

Particularly striking is Perla's role as 'a mediator of loss and bereavement', to use Bruce Scates's term.⁴³ As one who had lost a brother in the First World War and had a husband, two sons, and a daughter serving in the current one, Perla had the moral platform from which to urge on people who were sailing towards potential probable death. A talented amateur painter, she produced a picture of the four uniformed family members, evoking the merging of the family and the war. When her son, Roy, was killed in the Italian campaign, Perla, impressively, insisted on going to the docks and singing on the same day that she received the news. Roy's death, which became widely known, increased her impact on her audiences, who gave her an outpouring of sympathy.⁴⁴ As the war drew to an end, her role shifted to that of a leader of mourning. Her appearances at post-war events combined reunion nostalgia with helping the veterans reconcile themselves to the deaths of lost comrades.

There was a genuine kindness to Perla. She worked hard on providing comfort to men who arrived injured on hospital ships, helping them to come to terms with their afflictions, and with the deaths of their comrades. She was immensely socially skilled and not a real snob, being anxious to include private soldiers, naval ratings and merchant seamen in her activities.⁴⁵ But she was susceptible to the allure of power, and her memoirs never fail to give the titles and decorations of her influential friends.

While Perla's own image was maternal, she also to some extent instrumentalised the sexuality of the volunteers in her morale-boosting efforts. Planning a visit with a women's choir to patients at the Wentworth TB hospital, Perla

“ ... suggested to the girls that that they wear gay evening frocks on these singing occasions. The impact this had on the men was remarkable. They had become used to seeing girls in uniform only – some of the men had not been outside the wards for two years or more – but now they were seeing vivid reminders of their happy pre-war days”.⁴⁶

Perla and the Crises of Empire

Perla had difficulty coping with the gap between the empire she imagined and the actuality of a divided South Africa, of a failing imperial project and of changing metropolis. Perla saw a unified white empire in which her voice created a transcendent unity. She had a remarkable capacity to resist evidence to the contrary, by confining her vision to her own social world. In her retrospective imagination in 1939 ‘[t]hroughout the country eager young men clamoured for a declaration of war’.⁴⁷ In reality, the enlistment of white combat troops proved difficult for the Smuts government. Many of those who joined in the early stages were escaping unemployment, and once the limited constituency of ideologically-committed imperial loyalists had been exhausted and the economy buoyed up by war production, young men were hard to find. And clearly, by all the families Perla meant all white Anglophones; Afrikaner nationalist had no desire to support the British in the conflict.⁴⁸

Perla was slow to realise that British politics, was changing, as the troops developed the critical view of the social order that would lead to the triumph of the Labour Party in 1945. She would have been appalled by the views of some British soldiers in the port. Second Lieutenant Alun Lewis of the South Wales Borders, a promising young poet, was on the troopship *Athlone Castle*, when it came into harbour in November 1942. Lewis saw the reality of a racially divided, rather than united Durban:

The white people are all very concerned about their future ... I don’t agree with those of my friends who say they’d like to settle in South Africa after the war. I think it’s got much savager problems to settle than Europe has and I doubt that they’re heading towards a solution. You can’t educate and suppress a people at the same time – if you do, you repeat the battle of India.⁴⁹

The packed troopships were incubators of discontent. The inequality between officers who received full liner service, and those of the men, living in miserable conditions, usually below decks, made class distinctions very visible. Lewis reflected: “I find it particularly unbearable in troopships and troop trains where the difference in comfort is glaring and appalling ...”.⁵⁰ He left a memorable description of the conditions in the depths of the converted liner on which he sailed:

... what places they are! The bunks piled high to the roof on the hatches and around the hatches, men like maggots playing the old soldiers’ gambling

game 'Housey Housey' and the croupier shouting the numbers in a voice like a bull. Hammocks, beer bottles, oranges, bare legs protruding from shirts, sweat and smell and foetid warmth."⁵¹

The most dramatic result of these overcrowded and insanitary conditions was a mutiny which occurred on the *City of Canterbury* in Durban harbour during January 1942. A group of British soldiers and airman had been put ashore to await transport on to Singapore at the Clairwood transit camp. They had apparently had quite a pleasant stay at Durban, with plenty of leave and local hospitality. But when they went on board the *City of Canterbury*, she struck them as unseaworthy and ill-equipped. The ship was also filthy and infested with bugs. 300 to 400 British pilots, air ground staff and soldiers went ashore and announced that they would not sail. 188 were court-martialed during February, in three separate groups. Numerous soldiers and airmen were sentenced to hard labour. But except in the case of Sergeant Harry Jackson, a former militant of the radical Independent Labour Party, who was identified as a ring-leader, the sentences were subsequently suspended, subject to the men agreeing to sail for the East, which they all duly did.⁵² As Geoffrey Field points out, the incident reflected a broader unrest amongst servicemen about their treatment by the authorities.⁵³ A less dramatic sequel took place in August 1942, when men on the *Empire Woodlark*, then in Durban harbour, also refused to sail. But the incident was resolved without major disciplinary action.⁵⁴

The reality of social conflict in the troopships was most difficult for Perla to negotiate. Even she had to recognize that life on the troopships was grim. She was to write in her memoirs that the ships "had to be packed with four or five their normal passenger capacity. The men suffered intensely from their close confinement ...".⁵⁵ But she wanted to believe that all troops were basically staunch, and when they were not, she thought that any discontent was superficial. The *Canterbury* incident seems to have entirely passed Perla by. She was aware of the *Woodlark* events, but wrongly believed this was the only mutiny that had taken place in the harbour during the war. Her commitment to the vision of imperial unity was such that she took refuge from evidence of dissent, in attributing to herself the power to heal conflict with her voice.⁵⁶ She recounted being thanked by military policemen for heading off a riot of mutinous Australian soldiers, by singing *Waltzing Matilda*.⁵⁷ She also believed that she had prevented a crowd of embarked soldiers' families from tearing down the harbour fence to get to the dockside. Her voice, she wrote, had "a magical calming effect."⁵⁸ Thus in her own mind, Perla's vocal talent became a mystical source of imperial unity.

An important reflection of the extent to which the imperial authorities saw the question of morale as critical, and recognized the value of the volunteer workers, was the foundation in April 1943, of a Durban Seamen's Welfare Committee, drawing together British and South African officials and volunteer organizations and later, the British seamen's union. The committee included Perla Siedle's brother Basil, who represented the shipping agents of the city, as well as Reverend Smith and a representative of the Seamen's Institute. The committee ensured the issue of

new clothing to shipwrecked seamen, provided for treatment of venereal disease and tuberculosis sufferers, and did other useful work. However, whereas Perla took a relentlessly optimistic, if paternalistic, view of the merchant seamen, the committee's minutes show a concern with political dissidence and alleged anti-social behaviour amongst the seafarers. The respectable Durbanites on the committee were alarmed by the activities of an leftist, possibly Communist-led, International Seamen's Centre and by the formation of a South African Seamen's Union, and reported these groups to the authorities. The committee complained that the 'reprehensible conduct' of 'undesirable elements' amongst the sailors was unchecked because there was no space to imprison them. They called for better identification processes for seamen, and sought the tightening of policing of the Point area's pubs.⁵⁹

Apparently also invisible to Perla was the revolt of the harbour's African workforce. Yet it also was, in a sense, situated in a certain relation to imperial politics; the men could actually see the power and the wealth of the empire spread before them in the harbour. The migrant dock workers lived for the most part in in the harbour's Point area. They were concentrated in dismal labour barracks, from where they worked as day labourers. In 1939 the Point dockers elected as their leader a man from Ixopo called Zulu Phungula.⁶⁰ One of the relatively progressive aspects of the wartime economic policies was that the government instituted wage boards with the power to fix minimum wages. These tended to raise the wages of black workers in order to ensure wartime labour stability. In the case of Durban, the proclamation of a minimum for so-called unskilled workers did mark an improvement over almost starvation-level existing levels. However, the dockworkers were left out of the determination. This led to a series of strikes culminating in mid-1942, at the very height of the North African crisis. In the course of this upsurge, Phungula invoked moral claims on the British Empire in justification of his demands, for example telling a July 1942 strike meeting that "the government and the employers agree amongst themselves" and yet "we the natives have helped build up the British Empire far above the Kingdom of Heaven".⁶¹ He also on occasion called for wage equality with whites, in a biblical appeal calling for the Africans to "share the milk and honey that abound in this country".⁶²

In her later years, Perla Siedle Gibson bathed in the extraordinary level of appreciation that she received. She was introduced to the Queen during the 1947 Royal visit to South Africa and the new monarch on a later visit to London. On a 1954 visit to London she was the subject of a television special with Wilfred Pickles and an audience of ex-servicemen who had been through the Durban. In the fifties and early sixties, on visits to the UK, she starred at veterans' rallies. She delighted in meeting the likes of Lord Mountbatten, Field Marshal Slim and former Australian Prime Minister S.M. Bruce. Her role as a leader of mourning was extended through her involvement with the British Commonwealth Ex-Service League, which organized trips to cemeteries in Europe.⁶³ After her death in 1971, 34 British veterans travelled to South Africa for a memorial service. Much later, veterans contributed to a fund to build a memorial statue to Perla (sculpted by a relative).⁶⁴

These linkages to the veterans were in a sense the after-life of the era when South Africa had been an admired member of the wartime alliance.

However, hovering invisibly in the background was the spectre of apartheid, and South Africa's consequent international isolation. Like many Anglo-South Africans, Perla experienced something of an identity crisis when South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961. She wrote that: "while political ties were severed, the sentimental links will forever be enshrined in the memories of those to whom the Queen and her family symbolize the historical greatness of Britain in Peace and War".⁶⁵ And by the time of her death in 1971, it was clear, with the rise of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, that while the generation for whom Perla had sung might still give South Africa a hearing, a younger and more leftist sector of the British public would not.

Similarly, post-transition South Africa has little time for Perla's legend; symbolically, the harbour-side statue was repositioned and cut off from the public behind barbed wire, from whence it seemed unlikely to be retrieved.

Conclusion

Perla Siedle Gibson's imagination of the empire was an incredibly powerful one, finding a deep resonance with hundreds of thousands of British, South African and Commonwealth soldiers and sailors, before and after the war. But she and those who thought like her were sublimely unaware of the possibility of imperial decline before it happened, and were liable to be resentful of it afterwards. Natal loyalism was already a threatened force in her heyday, and became the most doomed of causes. Most importantly, Perla remained to the end of her life unable to acknowledge the disastrous historical trajectory that her city and her country were heading along. Alun Lewis, who was die tragically in Burma, understood more about Durban in his two day visit than Perla Gibson did in her lifetime, when he wrote:

We thought we'd sailed beyond the bounds
Of our traditional and legal hate,
But here the mood lies deeper than the blade,
And rancor broods a harsh, consumptive fate.

In each green humid esplanade,
Each sun-cracked parching wall,
The crickets' shrill metallic buzz
Ignores what must befall.⁶⁶

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- ¹ P. Siedle Gibson, *Durban's Lady in White: An Autobiography* (Ridgeway: Aedificamus, 1991),
- ² *Time*, 28 February, 1944.
- ³ W. Pennington, *Pick Up Your Parrots and Monkeys: The Life of A Boy Soldier in India* (London: Cassell, 2003), 256.
- ⁴ S. Marschall, 'Articulating Cultural Pluralism through Public Art as Heritage in South Africa', *Visual Anthropology*, 23:2 (2010): 83.
- ⁵ B. Nasson, *South Africa at War, 1939-1945* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012), 77-9.
- ⁶ Durban City Council, *Industrial Durban* (Durban: DCC, 1947); L. Kuper, H. Watts and R. Davies, *Durban: A Study in Racial Ecology* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1958).
- ⁷ S. Dubow, 'Introduction', in A. Jeeves and S. Dubow eds., *South Africa's 1940's: Worlds of Possibilities*, (Johannesburg: Double Storey, 2005), 1-19.
- ⁸ A. Munro, *The Winston Specials: Troopships via the Cape 1940-1943* (Liskeard, Maritime Books, 2006).
- ⁹ L.C. Turner, H.R. Gordon-Cumming, and J.E. Betzler, *War in the Southern Ocean* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- ¹⁰ A. Thompson, 'The Languages of Loyalism in Southern Africa, c. 1870–1939', *The English Historical Review*, 118, 477 (2003): 617–650.
- ¹¹ J. Lambert, 'An Unknown People: Reconstructing British South African Identity', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37,4 (2009): 599-617.
- ¹² An important example was A.I. Kajee; see G. Vahed and T. Waetjen, 'Shifting Grounds: A.I. Kajee and the Political Quandary of 'Moderates' in the Search for an Islamic School in Durban, 1943-1948', *South African Historical Journal*, 67,3 (2015): 316-334.
- ¹³ Smuts to M.C. Gillet, 7 June 1942, in J. van der Poel (ed.), *Selections from the Smuts Papers* vol. VI December 1934 – August 1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 568.
- ¹⁴ K. Roy, 'Discipline and Morale of the African, British and Indian Army Units in Burma and India during World War II: July 1943 to August 1945,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 44, 6 (2010): 1255-1282.
- ¹⁵ An interesting exception is E. Karageorgos, *Australian Soldiers in South Africa and Vietnam: Words from the Battlefield* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016), which highlights the impact of civilian attitudes at home on combat troops.
- ¹⁶ B. Scates, 'The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work and Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War', *Labour History*, 81 (2001): 29-49.
- ¹⁷ S. Chetty, 'Gender Under Fire: Interrogating War in South Africa 1939-1945', MA dissertation, University of Natal, Durban, 2001 http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/women/Chetty-S_Gender_under_fire_War_1939-1945.pdf downloaded 12 March 2018; S. Chetty, 'Our Victory was Our Defeat: Race, Gender and Liberalism in the Union Defence Force, 1939-1945', PhD dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2006, especially 108-161, <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/2348> downloaded 12 March 2018.
- ¹⁸ J. Hyslop, 'Durban as a Portal of Globalization: Mines, Railways, Docks and Steamships in the Empire of Otto Siedle's Natal Direct Line, 1879-1929' *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 26, 1 (2015): 35-50; Otto Siedle, *Siedle Saga: Reminiscences and Reflections* (Durban: Knox, 1940).
- ¹⁹ P.S. Thompson, *Natalians First: Separatism in South Africa 1909-1961* (Johannesburg: Southern, 1990).
- ²⁰ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 27-30.
- ²¹ T. Dederling, "'Avenge the Lusitania": The Anti-German Riots in South Africa in 1915', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 31:3 (2013): 256-88.
- ²² Gibson, *Lady in White*, 30-44.

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- ²³ E. Rosenthal, *Schooners and Skyscrapers* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1963), 183-4; O. Siedle, *Siedle Saga: Reminiscences and Reflections* (Durban, Knox, 1940), 136-7.
- ²⁴ Scates, 'Unknown Sock Knitter', 34-35.
- ²⁵ Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban, 98/28 Ethel Campbell papers; J. Malherbe, *Port Natal: A Pioneer Story* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1965), 210-234. Ethel was the sister of the poet Roy Campbell, whose ill-fated attempts to launch a literary avant-garde in Durban in the mid-1920s were not well received by the city's establishment.
- ²⁶ Chetty, 'Gender Under Fire' and Chetty, 'Our Victory'.
- ²⁷ *The Seaman*, April 1945.
- ²⁸ Missions to Seamen (Durban), 'Annual Report and Balance Sheet 1942'. I am grateful to the present management of The Missions to Seamen, Durban, for allowing me to see these reports.
- ²⁹ 'The Missions to Seamen (Durban Branch), Wellington Road, Durban, Annual Report for 1943'.
- ³⁰ J. Wrinch-Schulz, *The Happy Ship: A History of Durban Girl's College* (Durban: Durban Girl's College, 1977), 151.
- ³¹ The Missions to Seamen (Durban), 'Annual Report and Balance Sheet 1941'.
- ³² *Natal Mercury*, 25 March 1936.
- ³³ Siedle, *Lady in White*, 49.
- ³⁴ Siedle, *Lady in White*, 71-2.
- ³⁵ J. Fennell, 'Courage and Cowardice in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and Defeat in the Summer of 1942', *War in History*, 20,1 (2013): 99-122.
- ³⁶ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 162.
- ³⁷ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 169.
- ³⁸ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 169.
- ³⁹ But there seems to have been some literary cutting and pasting at a work here. Perla accidentally let slip that the phrase actually originates in a celebratory account of her in a 1949 novel by Alan Jenkins, in which she is amongst also described as "an outpost of Britain, South Africa's loyalty, symbol of the Empire family". Gibson, *Lady in White*, 130.
- ⁴⁰ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 20.
- ⁴¹ Pennington, *Pick Up*, 256-7.
- ⁴² Missions to Seamen (Durban), 'Annual Report and Balance Sheet 1942'.
- ⁴³ Scates, 'Unknown Sock Knitter'.
- ⁴⁴ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 102.
- ⁴⁵ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 79-80.
- ⁴⁶ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 142.
- ⁴⁷ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 49.
- ⁴⁸ A. Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-1945', *The Journal of African History*, 40,3 (1999): 351-365; N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939-1951* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2005).
- ⁴⁹ A. Lewis, *In the Green Tree: The Letters and Short Stories of Alun Lewis* (Cardigan: Parthian/University of Wales, 2006) 13-14..
- ⁵⁰ Lewis, *Green Tree*, 59.
- ⁵¹ Lewis, *Green Tree*, 8.
- ⁵² G.R. Rubin, *Durban 1942: A British Troopship Revolt* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1992). Tragically and ironically, the men aboard the *City of Canterbury* almost all reached South East Asia in time for the British collapse there, and became prisoners of war of the Japanese, while the men convicted in the court martials were diverted to India, and were spared that ordeal.
- ⁵³ G.G. Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class 1939-1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 263, 273-4.
- ⁵⁴ K. Stofer, 'Mutiny', is a participant's account of the incident.; see <http://kenstofer93.blogspot.com/2013/09/mutiny.html> downloaded 12 March 2018.
- ⁵⁵ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 125-6.

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- ⁵⁶ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 126.
- ⁵⁷ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 127.
- ⁵⁸ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 128.
- ⁵⁹ National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria, SW 443/2 Welfare of Seamen in Ports (Durban Port).
- ⁶⁰ R. Callebert, 'Working Class Action and Informal Trade on the Durban Docks, 1930s-1950s,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38,4 (2012): 847-861.
- ⁶¹ Callebert, 'Working Class Action', 852.
- ⁶² Callebert, 'Working Class Action', 852.
- ⁶³ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 155.
- ⁶⁴ Marschall, 'Articulating Cultural Pluralism', 83.
- ⁶⁵ Gibson, *Lady in White*, 155.
- ⁶⁶ A. Lewis (Cary Archard ed.), *Collected Poems* (Bridgend, Seren, 2007), 188.