JOSEPHINE ELIZABETH GREY BUTLER

NATIVE RACES AND THE WAR

Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler

Native Races and the War

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tessa Caldwell

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Introduction

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At its core, this book asks whether an empire can prosecute a distant war and still keep faith with the indigenous peoples whose lives its decisions shape, or whether the expediencies of strategy, settlement, and public opinion will inevitably override their claims to justice, recognition, and security, testing the relationship between power and conscience in South Africa, challenging the easy rhetoric of civilization with the harder discipline of law, and asking readers at home to weigh victory not only in terms of territory and prestige but also by the standard of how the least protected are remembered and safeguarded when the guns fall silent.

Native Races and the War is a work of non-fiction advocacy written by Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler, a British social reformer best known for her campaigns for women’s rights and civil liberties. Composed at the turn of the twentieth century during the South African, or Second Boer, War, it situates its argument within the intertwined settings of the battlefield and the British public sphere. The book enters a heated contemporary debate about imperial policy by focusing attention on the African communities commonly described as native races, inviting readers to consider how wartime decisions would shape their legal status, safety, and prospects after the conflict.

Rather than narrating military events, Butler concentrates on the ethical and political stakes that war

creates for those who are not its principal combatants. The premise is straightforward: Britain, in deciding the terms and conduct of war and peace, bears responsibilities toward indigenous Africans that cannot be treated as secondary matters. The reading experience is lucid and bracing. Butler’s voice is earnest and resolute; her style favors plain exposition over ornament; her tone balances urgency with restraint. She weaves contemporary discussions and available reports into a coherent argument designed to reach the general reader as well as officials who shape policy.

Throughout the work, Butler frames questions that lead the reader from first principles to practical consequences, showing how abstract language about protection, civilization, or neutrality can translate into rules, customs, and administrative habits that either safeguard or imperil lives. She writes with a reformer’s clarity, building paragraphs around contrasts—between ideal professions and actual practices, between promises and enforceable rights. The structure is cumulative rather than sensational, inviting reflection instead of indignation alone. By addressing readers as moral agents and citizens, she seeks to enlist them in the sober task of insisting that the fate of native populations be central to public policy.

Key themes emerge with consistency. The first is moral responsibility: the idea that the legitimacy of power depends on how it treats those with least leverage. A second is the rule of law, understood as a restraint on both military expedience and settler preference. A third is the critique of racial hierarchy as a solvent of the very civilizing claims

deployed to justify empire. Butler also reflects on witness and accountability, arguing that the experiences of non-European communities should not be filtered solely through metropolitan convenience. Together these themes ask readers to measure national success by the security of the most vulnerable.

These concerns remain unmistakably contemporary. Debates over the protection of civilians, transitional settlements after conflict, and the long afterlives of imperial policy echo across today’s news, while questions about race, citizenship, and legal equality still test public institutions. Butler’s insistence that humane principles be made operational speaks to current discussions of humanitarian law, peacebuilding, and restorative justice. Her method—connecting policy language to lived consequences—offers a model for civic scrutiny that resists euphemism and partisanship. Reading the book now illuminates both the period that produced it and the enduring challenge of ensuring that those most affected by decisions have a place in making them.

Approached today, Native Races and the War can be read as a historically situated appeal that still invites active, critical engagement. It rewards attention to its context—the pressures of wartime politics at the century’s turn—while speaking beyond its moment through its disciplined focus on rights, responsibility, and the human costs of policy. Without demanding prior expertise, it equips readers to ask clearer questions about who benefits from victory and whose protections are bargained away. In doing so, it strengthens a habit of reading public arguments for both

substance and consequence, a habit as necessary now as it was when Butler wrote.

Synopsis

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Native Races and the War by Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler is a non-fiction tract published during the South African War (1899–1902). Butler, a British social reformer, addresses the conflict through the lens of its consequences for indigenous African populations. Opening with the claim that wartime narratives often exclude native voices, she sets a purpose: to gather testimony, examine policy, and orient public judgment toward justice for those most vulnerable. She situates her discussion within the wider British debate about imperial responsibility, insisting that political aims and moral duties cannot be separated when military operations pass through occupied lands and dependent communities.

She sketches a concise historical background to explain how contesting European settler republics and the British Empire established power in southern Africa, and how indigenous societies were drawn into systems of labor, taxation, and control. Without attempting a full ethnography, Butler identifies the legal and administrative mechanisms that defined natives as subjects without commensurate protections, and notes how economic incentives escalated pressures on land and movement. This framework prepares her later argument that the war's conduct cannot be evaluated solely by European claims, because the daily conditions of African communities form an essential measure of both policy and legitimacy.

Turning from overview to evidence, Butler draws on contemporary reports, private letters made public, and accounts from observers working among African communities. She treats them as testimonies that must be weighed rather than sensationalized, contrasting corroborated patterns with disputed assertions. The method is cumulative: she assembles examples of routine practices affecting native welfare, and then places them against public statements made by combatant authorities. By stressing procedure and documentation, she signals that moral conclusions must rest on verifiable facts, inviting readers to look beyond slogans to consistent administrative behavior that shapes everyday security, labor conditions, and legal recourse.

From this evidentiary base, Butler examines how wartime measures alter the lived environment for native populations. She considers the implications of requisitions, forced movements, and heightened controls on travel and work, and how the suspension of ordinary safeguards exposes communities to arbitrary power. She scrutinizes proclamations and practices on both sides of the conflict insofar as they bear on indigenous rights and duties, and she tests official assurances against reported outcomes. The analysis links battlefield events to civil administration, arguing that the treatment of non-combatants is a decisive index of justice, and that emergencies do not erase obligations.

The work’s moral core is an argument about British responsibility. Butler calls for standards that align policy with humane governance and the rule of law, contending that

the strength of a nation lies not merely in victory but in the protection it affords the least protected. She addresses audiences at home—readers, voters, and legislators—who influence the prosecution of war and the shape of settlement. While critical of evasions and inconsistencies, she appeals to principles that many in Britain professed, pressing for transparency, restraint, and accountability whenever imperial power is exercised over dependent peoples within contested territories.

Having set out the grounds for judgment, Butler advances practical criteria by which a just outcome could be recognized. She emphasizes enforceable safeguards for native persons and property, stable access to impartial courts, and administrative practices that prevent exploitation in the name of security or commerce. Rather than endorsing a single institutional model, she urges that whatever arrangements follow the war be tested by their effects on those with least leverage. The point, repeatedly made, is that durable peace requires more than treaties among European powers; it demands everyday justice visible in villages, workplaces, and local jurisdictions.

The book closes by linking immediate choices to long-term character, arguing that the fate of native communities will reveal whether Britain’s professed ideals govern its conduct under stress. Without relying on dramatic revelations, Butler leaves readers with a clear metric: policy is to be judged by its consequences for the vulnerable. As a focused intervention in wartime debate, it keeps indigenous rights at the center of strategic and moral calculation. Its broader significance lies in the way it frames humanitarian

concern as a test of legitimacy in both conflict and settlement, a perspective that remains applicable beyond its original context.

Historical Context

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Native Races and the War was written in the midst of the South African War (1899–1902), when imperial policy dominated British politics and the press. Its author, Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler (1828–1906), was a prominent British social reformer known for leading the successful campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886 and for international anti-trafficking advocacy. Bringing this humanitarian authority to bear on colonial questions, she addressed the position of indigenous Africans under competing British and Boer regimes. The book intervenes in a debate conducted in Parliament, churches, and voluntary societies over the moral obligations of an avowedly Christian empire.

By the late nineteenth century, South Africa comprised British colonies at the Cape and Natal alongside the Boer republics of the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State. Mineral discoveries transformed the region: diamonds at Kimberley in the late 1860s and gold on the Witwatersrand after 1886 drew global capital and migrant labor. The Transvaal's government under President Paul Kruger restricted political rights for foreign-born 'Uitlanders' working in Johannesburg, sharpening tensions with Britain, whose investors and settlers pressed for reform. Strategic railways, customs revenues, and control over labor deepened competition between colonial administrations and republican authorities.

Escalation followed the 1895–96 Jameson Raid, an unauthorized incursion aimed at fomenting an uprising in Johannesburg, which discredited Cecil Rhodes and hardened Boer suspicions. Negotiations at the Bloemfontein Conference in 1899 between High Commissioner Alfred Milner and President Kruger failed over franchise and sovereignty issues. In October 1899 the Transvaal and Orange Free State issued an ultimatum; hostilities began shortly thereafter. Early British reverses in December 1899, later dubbed ‘Black Week,’ intensified scrutiny of policy. Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and Milner framed the conflict as necessary to secure rights and stability, claims contested by critics across Britain and the empire.

Indigenous African communities—including Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, and Swazi peoples—had long contended with land dispossession, forced labor, and legal segregation under both British colonial and Boer republican rule. Earlier conflicts, such as the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and frontier wars on the eastern Cape, had already constrained African autonomy. Statutes like the Cape’s Glen Grey Act of 1894 promoted individual land tenure and labor migration, while pass laws and hut taxes compelled wage work. Missionaries, chiefs, and colonial magistrates navigated plural legal systems in which customary law coexisted uneasily with Roman-Dutch and British legal frameworks, often to African disadvantage.

Missionary societies—the London Missionary Society, Wesleyan Methodists, and Scottish missions among them—produced reports on African conditions circulated in Britain through denominational journals and Parliamentary ‘Blue

Books.’ The Aborigines Protection Society, founded in 1837, campaigned for treaty observance and the rights of colonized peoples, lobbying the Colonial Office and mobilizing public petitions. Such organizations supplied evidence and testimony that reformers used to evaluate imperial conduct in southern Africa. Butler drew on this tradition of documentary advocacy, aligning moral suasion with practical policy proposals, and appealing to constituencies in Nonconformist churches as well as to legislators scrutinizing wartime administration.

The South African War drew many Africans into its orbit as scouts, laborers, and local defenders, even as both sides hesitated to arm them as combatants. Sieges such as Mafeking involved African auxiliaries and communities directly affected by military operations. From 1900, British ‘scorched earth’ tactics destroyed farms to deny resources to Boer commandos, precipitating mass civilian displacement. The army established concentration camps for Boer families and segregated camps for black Africans, where mortality was severe. Investigations and protests—most famously Emily Hobhouse’s 1901 report and the government-appointed Fawcett Commission—placed humanitarian oversight at the center of wartime debate.

At home, the war fractured British politics and opinion. Unionist supporters of the government contrasted with Liberals divided between ‘pro-Boer’ critics and Liberal Imperialists. Newspapers such as The Times, the Daily Mail, and the Manchester Guardian shaped perceptions of the war’s causes and conduct. Churches and civic groups mobilized the ‘Nonconformist conscience’ around questions

of justice, race, and national responsibility. Butler addressed readers formed by these arguments, engaging policy-makers like Chamberlain and Milner indirectly through appeals to public ethics, parliamentary accountability, and the testimony of missionaries and colonial officials about how military decisions affected indigenous African communities.

Native Races and the War reflects a Victorian humanitarian's resolve to judge imperial power by its professed Christian and liberal principles. Butler foregrounds the experiences and rights of African populations, insisting that any wartime policy and postwar settlement be measured by protections for land, law, labor, and personal security. Her argument draws on verifiable testimony rather than romanticized images of empire, challenging racial hierarchies embedded in colonial practice. The book thus stands within a broader movement that sought to align imperial governance with moral accountability, exposing the costs of strategic ambition when civil rights and human dignity are neglected.

Native Races and the War

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DEDICATED TO MY CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN.

I.

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APOLOGY FOR "YET ANOTHER BOOK" ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUESTION. FUTURE PEACE MUST BE BASED ON JUSTICE,—TO COLOURED AS WELL AS WHITE MEN. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEGALIZED SLAVERY AND THE SUBJECTION OF NATIVES BY INDIVIDUALS. THE TRANSVAAL IN 1877: ITS BANKRUPTCY: ITS ANNEXATION BY GREAT BRITAIN: ITS LIBERATION FROM GREAT BRITAIN IN 1881. CONVENTION OF 1881 SIGNED AT PRETORIA. BRITISH COMMISSIONERS' AUDIENCE WITH

300 NATIVE CHIEFS. SPEECHES AND SORROWFUL PROTESTS OF THE CHIEFS. ROYAL COMMISSION APPOINTED TO TAKE EVIDENCE. EVIDENCE OF NATIVES AND OTHERS CONCERNING SLAVERY IN THE TRANSVAAL. APPEAL OF THE CHRISTIAN KING KHAMA. LETTER OF M'PLAANK, NEPHEW OF CETEWAYO. PREVALENCE OF CONTEMPT FOR THE NATIVE RACES. SYMPATHY OF A NATIVE CHIEF WITH THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST.

In the midst of the manifold utterances and discussions on the burning question of to-day,—the War in South Africa,—there is one side of the subject which, it seems to me, has not as yet been considered with the seriousness which it deserves,—and that is the question of Slavery, and of the treatment of the native races of South Africa. Though this question has not yet in England or on the Continent been cited as one of the direct causes of the war, I am convinced,—as are many others,—that it lies very near to the heart of the present trouble.

The object of this paper is simply to bring witnesses together who will testify to the past and present condition of the native races under British, Dutch, and Transvaal[1] rule.

These witnesses shall not be all of one nation; they shall come from different countries, and among them there shall be representatives of the native peoples themselves. I shall add little of my own to the testimony of these witnesses. But I will say, in advance, that what I desire to make plain for some sincere persons who are perplexed, is this,—that where a Government has established by Law the principle of the complete and final abolition of Slavery, and made its practice illegal for all time,—as our British Government has done,—there is hope for the native races;—there is always hope that, by an appeal to the law and to British authority, any and every wrong done to the natives, which approaches to or threatens the reintroduction of slavery, shall be redressed. The Abolition of Slavery, enacted by our Government in 1834, was the proclamation of a great principle, strong and clear, a straight line by which every enactment dealing with the question, and every act of individuals, or groups of individuals, bearing on the liberty of the natives can be measured, and any deviation from that straight line of principle can be exactly estimated and judged.

When we speak of injustice done to the natives by the South African Republics, we are apt to be met with the reproach that the English have also been guilty of cruelty to native races. This is unhappily true, and shall not be disguised in the following pages;—but mark this,—that it is true of certain individuals bearing the English name, true of groups of individuals, of certain adventurers and speculators. But this fact does not touch the far more

important and enduring fact that *wherever British rule is established, slavery is abolished, and illegal*.

This fact is the ground of the hope for the future of the Missionaries of our own country, and of other European countries, as well as of the poor natives themselves, so far as they have come to understand the matter; and in several instances they have shown that they do understand it, and appreciate it keenly.

Those English persons, or groups of persons, who have denied to the native labourers their hire (which is the essence of slavery), have acted on their own responsibility, and *illegally*. This should be made to be clearly understood in future conditions of peace, and rendered impossible henceforward.

That future peace which we all desire, on the cessation of the present grievous war, must be a peace founded on justice, for there is no other peace worthy of the name; and it must be not only justice as between white men, but as between white men and men of every shade of complexion.

A speaker at a public meeting lately expressed a sentiment which is more or less carelessly repeated by many**[1q]**. I quote it, as helping me to define the principle to which I have referred, which marks the difference between an offence or crime committed by an individual *against* the law, and an offence or crime sanctioned, permitted, or enacted by a State or Government itself, or by public authority in any way.

This speaker, after confessing, apparently with reluctance, that "the South African Republic had not been stainless in its relations towards the blacks," added, "but for