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BLACK PEOPLE AND THE
SOUTH AFRICAN WAR 1899-1902

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TO ALISON

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‘You must not think that you can frighten me, and my people, with your war talk. You know that I am a Son of the White Queen.’

Khama, the Ngwato ruler, to General F. A. Grobler,
23 October 1899

‘I truly believe that if there is war again the people of the Transvaal will assist the Boers . . . The Natives of the Transvaal say “we expected deliverance whereas we have gone deeper into bonds”.’

Segale, a Kgatla chief, writing in *Koranta ea Becoana*,
6 August 1903

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Preface

'The first day of the first week of the first month in 1900. Not at all a lovely morning. The distant pop of the Mauser distinctly shows that there is no holiday for poor beleaguered us.' With these words Sol Plaatje began his diary entry for the first day of a new century, besieged by the Boers in Mafeking. John Comaroff's recovery of Plaatje's siege diary, and its subsequent publication in 1973, really marked the starting-point of the present study. Plaatje was one of more than 7000 blacks who shared the experiences of the siege with Baden-Powell's frontier force and the European townspeople of Mafeking. He was also one of more than four million black people in whose midst the familiar dramas of the South African War were played out. Yet at the time of the diary's publication almost nothing was known of the wartime experiences of South Africa's majority black population. How did black people interpret the issues over which the war was fought? What part did they play in military operations? How were their lives and livelihoods affected by the circumstances of military upheaval?

It was with questions such as these uppermost in mind that I embarked upon the research that has ultimately led to this book. It soon became evident that there was a wealth of material in archives in Britain and southern Africa on the experiences of black people during the war; that black people were far more than either spectators to, or passive victims of, a white man's quarrel; and that a thorough revision of accepted views on the war was called for, one that interpreted the struggle not from the vantage point of either London or Pretoria but rather in the context of a complex and rapidly changing colonial society increasingly shaped, but not yet transformed, by mining capital.

The book is the product of work that began when I was attached to the Centre for Southern African Studies at the University of York. I am grateful to the Social Science Research Council for supporting me for three years at the Centre, and to those who gave me assistance and encouragement while much of the archival research was being undertaken, in particular the Centre's Director, Christopher R. Hill, Anne Akeroyd, Tom Lodge, Robert Baldock and my supervisor, Harry Wilson. Professor Ronald Robinson made a number of perceptive criticisms when examining the thesis out of which the

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Preface

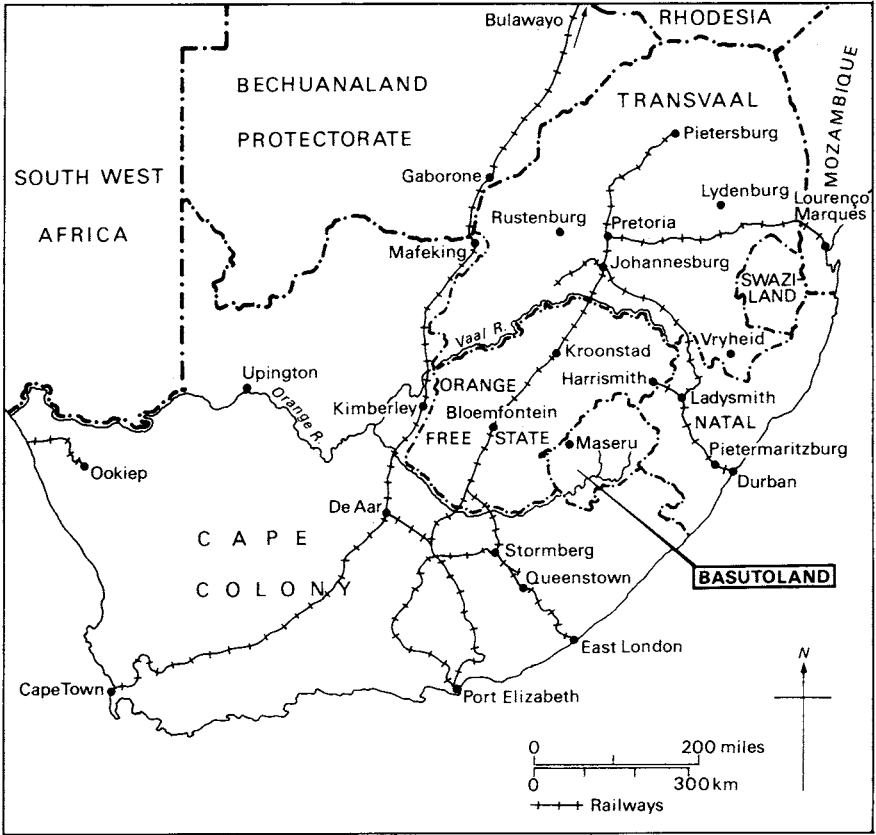
book has emerged. Since leaving York a number of people have given valuable advice on drafts of the whole or parts of the book, and I would especially like to thank Brian Willan, Burrige Spies, Bill Nasson, Albert Grundlingh, Bob Edgar and John Lonsdale. Any inaccuracies of fact or interpretation that remain are of course my own responsibility. Ann O'Connor helped me enormously by typing the final manuscript in her usual efficient way. Writing a book demands considerable patience and understanding on the part of those around you, and I am deeply grateful to Alison, my wife, for showing these qualities in such abundance.

Cambridge
May 1982

A note on orthography

Throughout the book I have tried to discover and use the most modern and appropriate spelling of African proper nouns, so that Sekukuni becomes Sekhukhune, Linchwe becomes Lentshwe, Lerothodi becomes Lerotholi, and so on. In general I have omitted Bantu prefixes, though in one or two major cases these have been retained since in modern usage it is more common to do so, e.g. Barolong rather than Rolong. In quotations I have retained the original spelling in most cases unless this seemed likely to lead to misunderstanding.

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Map 1 South Africa, 1899