

## **Joseph Gerrans and Resistance to the Planned Incorporation of Botswana into the Union of South Africa, 1909**

*Martin Plaut\**

### **Abstract**

This note is an account of Joseph Gerrans who represented Kgosi Sebele I of the Bakwena and Kgosi Bathoen I of the Bangwaketse in a deputation to London in 1909. This was to protest against the planned incorporation of Botswana (then called Bechuanaland Protectorate) into the Union of South Africa to be established in 1910. Gerrans, who was a trader living in Mahikeng, was on good terms with local people and clearly won their trust. His role had been covered by the Botswana historian Jeff Ramsay (1995:85-96). Therefore, I draw on this work and add a little more to what we know about Gerrans. He has previously been described as ‘Possibly of mixed race, or coloured, parentage’ (Morton, Ramsay and Mgadla 2008:168). However, this note observes that Gerrans was white, came from Cornwall, and continued to maintain ties with Britain. Hilary Thompson, a resident in the town in which Gerrans was born, drew on local records and the census for information about his origins.

### **Joseph Gerrans and Campaign Against Incorporation into the Union**

He was born in the village of Tregony, on the River Fal, in Cornwall in 1850 (personal communication with Hilary Thompson 4 January 2015). He was the son of William Gerrans, a wheelwright and blacksmith, and was one of nine children. In the 1851 census Joseph was reported as being one year old. In 1861, aged 11, he was a primary school pupil and his father was described as an ‘agricultural machine maker’. The family business, W Gerrans & Son, was situated in the village and probably run by Joseph’s brother. Joseph reappears in Tregony with his widowed mother in the 1881 census, described as carpenter/builder, aged 31. This is the last entry on him in the censuses, so he probably emigrated fairly soon afterwards.

By 1891 Joseph Gerrans had established himself in Mahikeng (then called Mafeking), working for De Beers as a wagon-builder and blacksmith (*Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* 3 June 1915). By the time of the South African War (1899-1902) Gerrans was clearly well established in the town. Mahikeng was besieged by Boer forces for 217 days, from October 1899 to May 1900, during which time Mahikeng was regularly shelled and almost reduced to starvation. Gerrans was a town councillor and clearly used his skills to good effect – building an artillery piece known as the ‘Wolf’ in his workshop. A letter from Gerrans to Colonel Baden-Powell, the British garrison commander, was sold at an auction by the London firm of Argyll Etkin in May 2011. A passage from the auction catalogue reads:

Three page letter from J. Gerrans, coach and wagon builder of Mafeking, to General Baden-Powell, each page on headed notepaper showing mechanics bearing arms during the siege outside Gerrans works, with the gun Wolf. The letter thanks the General and hospital staff for their care to Gerrans whilst in hospital during the siege, promises him a souvenir made from a piece of shrapnel shell, tells of his lecturing on the siege in Cape Town and being invited by the Governor to Government House where he presented a clock in a shell case, and asks Baden Powell to write a line testifying to the part played by Gerrans men during the siege, including building the carriage for the gun Wolf.

---

\*Martin Plaut, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. Email: martin.plaut@btinternet.com

Sadly it has not proved possible to trace the owner of the letter. The gun itself, now in the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich, South London, is captured in a photograph from the museum. This shows a group of men around the weapon, with this caption: ‘The “Wolf Gun” was a 4.5 inch howitzer made by British engineers from a drainpipe during the Siege of Mafeking. The weapon fired cannonballs made at an improvised blast furnace in the town. From an album of 48 photographs compiled for Lord Roberts’ (National Army Museum 1971).

Gerrans recovered from the wound he had suffered as a result of a shell and was soon back at work (*Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* 20 February 1900 and *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 January 1900). His obituary in 1915 described Joseph Gerrans as ‘a man of firm conviction [who] had a large sympathy for the native and coloured people who regarded him as a staunch friend’ (*Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* 3 June 1915). Gerrans had a good reputation with the Batswana in Bechuanaland Protectorate as well. As a result, Kgosi Bathoen and Kgosi Sechele recruited him to represent them on the deputation to London in 1909. The deputation, led by WP Schreiner, former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony and a supporter of black rights, was a last ditch attempt to win the franchise for South African men, irrespective of race, and not to restrict the vote to whites. The deputation also hoped to resist attempts by Britain and white South African politicians to incorporate the Botswana, Lesotho (then called Basutoland) and Swaziland or High Commission Territories into the Union of South Africa, when it came into existence in 1910. Gerrans was asked to join the deputation to maintain Botswana as a separate Protectorate under the British Crown.

The *dikgosi* gave Gerrans letters of accreditation, which he sent to the Colonial Office in London. In his letter to Gerrans, Sebele wrote that he had heard that the former was ‘going to England for your health. Knowing that you are always desirous to help the natives in any just cause, we desire you if possible to speak for us to the English people and ask them not to give us and our country over to the South African Government. We are still happy and well contented under the Imperial government and we have no desire to be under any other’ (National Archive, PRO CO 417/479, 24 March 1909).

Gerrans was not the only white to be asked to represent the people of Botswana. On 13 April 1909 Sol Plaatje (an interpreter for the British during the siege of Mahikeng and a founding member of the African National Congress in 1912) wrote to Schreiner on behalf of the kgosi of the Barolong in Mahikeng (Plaatje to Schreiner 13 April 1909). Plaatje addressed Schreiner as ‘the fearless champion of the cause of the Natives’ asked him to ‘pursue their objections (to Union) and to make them public’. The *dikgosi* had engaged in a lengthy campaign to remain out of South African control as Union approached. When the idea of incorporation was first mooted, the secretary to Sebele wrote that ‘We have found that the white settlers do not like the black people, neither do they appreciate to see them own land the wealth of which was given to us by God. They only desire to see destruction, hatred, war, and poverty for the black people’ (Ramsay 1995:85-96).

When the acting resident commissioner of the Bechuanaland Protectorate informed the Batswana in January 1909 that they were likely to be incorporated into the South African state, Sebele, as the most senior kgosi replied that he rejected the suggestion. He pointing out that previous delegations had been sent to London to press this point. ‘We wished to be under the direct control of the Imperial Government. I am under the King – King Edward. True, we may appear as useless people; nevertheless we have no desire for change’ (Ramsay 1995:85-96). Sebele was followed by Bathoen, who held out his hand to show a signet ring, engraved with a crocodile, the totem of his people and declared that ‘A ring is a sign of an indissoluble bond. This ring was given to me by the late Queen Victoria... as a proof that the promises made would never be broken and that the Bangwaketsi would forever remain under the protection of Her majesty’ (Ramsay 1995:85-96).

The Batswana were not the only peoples of southern Africa resisting incorporation in the

planned Union. The Swazi and the Basotho also made their feeling plain in petitions and deputations to the British. The Basotho had at their disposal between 60,000 and 80,000 troops. A secret November 1908 despatch from General Paul Metheun, commander of British forces in South Africa, was candid about the threat this force might pose. He wrote that ‘The leading feature of the Basutos as an enemy would be that every man would be mounted, and well mounted. Probably they would fight as mounted infantry, dismounting and using their rifles, but they are a nation of horsemen and quite capable of acting together in units’ (National Archive, PRO CO 48/602, 6 November 1908). The chief magistrate at Matatiele, just south-east of Lesotho, warned that ‘I learnt from good sources that the Basuto Nation has determined in the event of Union government at any time endeavouring to force them to come under the Union they will resist if necessary with force of arms and that the tribes this side of the Berg will join them’ (National Archive, PRO CO 48/602, undated). The British kept a close and wary eye on the Basotho, fully aware that they might well forcibly resist being swallowed up by South Africa.

The petitions and protestations, as well as the potential threat posed by the Basotho, caused the Colonial Office by late 1908 to decide against the immediate incorporation of the High Commission Territories into South Africa. Although absorption at a later date was not ruled out, this was to be determined once the question of ‘native consent’ had been addressed. This position was communicated on 25 October 1908 to Sir Henry de Villiers, president of the South African National Convention drawing up the draft constitution (Ramsay 1995:85-96). As a result, the South African official delegation knew, even before it arrived in London, that the High Commission Territories would not be included in the planned Union.

Joseph Gerrans’s participation in the Schreiner deputation was, therefore, something of an insurance measure by the Batswana dikgosi. They were aware of the tendency of the imperial government to backslide when under pressure. Gerrans remained actively involved in the campaign, informing the British public and the Colonial Office of an important meeting that had been held back in Botswana. The Times carried the report on the 24 July, at Gerrans’s instigation (*The Times* 24 July 1909). Two days earlier he had made the situation known through a letter to the Colonial Office (Gerrans to Colonial Office 22 July 1909). This contained a detailed description of a meeting convened by Barry May, the acting resident commissioner in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and the dikgosi. May warned the dikgosi that Union was coming and that they would be effected by it. He informed them that this would not take place immediately, but over time, and once Union came about their Protectorate might be left like ‘a little island cut off from the mainland’ (National Archive, PRO CO 417/479, undated note received by the Colonial Office 23 July 1909). May continued, ‘That will not be good for anyone concerned; all in the same house should be under one head. The Government does not wish to hand you over because it is tired; when it takes place, if ever, it will be because the Imperial Government believes it to be for the good of the whole of South Africa. Of course, there will be [a] representative of the King in the Protectorate, and his business will be to see justice is done in the whole of South Africa’.

Sebele was unimpressed by what he heard from May. ‘I hear, but I have no wish to enter into the new Government, whether Transvaal or Cape Colony. I want to rule as before – under the King, and not under a lot of lawyers “Agents’.” Bathoen was equally unmoved, pointing out that he had received assurances from Queen Victoria when he went to visit her. ‘We do not understand the methods of the Government now, we surely are not cattle to be possessed or disinherited without so much as knowing our own pleasure in the matter. Now the Queen listened to our prayer; she has protected us and we are thankful; we want to remain under the same rule; we promised to pay a tax; we have fulfilled our side of the bargain, nor had we any reason to think that when we left England, the Queen had any further intentions concerning us’ (National Archive, PRO CO 417/479, undated note received by the Colonial Office 23 July 1909). It was absolutely clear that the *dikgosi* had no intention of becoming part of South Africa. Closing the meeting Sebele declared that ‘Our children should enjoy the same privileges so long as we obey the King’.

The position was therefore clear. The High Commission Territories were – via their African leaders – implacably opposed to incorporation into South Africa, preferring imperial protection. Schreiner's deputation was determined to reinforce this stand and had the backing of key opposition figures, including men like the Liberal politician, Sir Charles Dilke and the Labour leader, Kier Hardie. The Colonial Office had decided, even before the South African delegation arrived, not to force the case. Afrikaner leaders such as Louis Botha, Jan Smuts and the rest of the white politicians were not going to get their way on this issue.

Gerrans did what he could to make the case for the freedom of the Batswana. He wrote to the British paper that he would have known from his youth in Truro (*Royal Cornwall Gazette* 15 July 1909). It was not the most obvious of publications to choose, but given it was Gerrans's background as a Cornishman he probably felt he could win them to his cause. In the lengthy letter he appealed to the sense of justice of his 'fellow Cornishmen and Britishers', pointing out that the plans to deprive black people of the vote was 'a heavy charge of dynamite placed at the base of a fabric [of society] which has taken a nearly a century to erect and fired by their own hands'.

The deputation, of which he was a part, failed to convince the British to reject those elements in the South African constitution which denied anyone but a white the right to stand for parliament or to vote (except in the Cape). At the same time Gerrans, and the rest of the deputation, played a significant role in reinforcing the stand taken by the High Commission Territories in demanding their independence from Pretoria. Gerrans returned to South Africa and remained for the rest of his days in Mahikeng, dying on the 2 June 1915, aged 66 (Death certificate, Joseph Gerrans). He was described in the certificate as a 'bachelor' and a 'mechanical engineer'.

## References

### Primary Sources

- Argyll Etkin 2011. *Lot 793: Philatelic/Postal History South Africa, Boer War – Mafeking*  
<http://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/philatelic-postal-history-south-africa-boer-w-1-c-031d8fee0a>,  
 accessed 20 January 2015.
- Death certificate of Joseph Gerrans 2 June 1915. (Courtesy of Gus Gerrans).
- Gerrans, J (the Morton Hotel, Russell Square) to the Colonial Office, 22 July 1909, National Archive, Kew, Public Record Office (PRO) Colonial Office (CO) 417/479: High Commission for South Africa. National Army Museum, London, Online Collection, <http://www.nam.ac.uk/online-collection/detail.php?acc=1971-01-36-1-33>, accessed 16 September 2015.
- National Archive, Kew, 1909, Public Record Office (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 417/479: High Commission for South Africa, Original Correspondence, Individuals, A - L.
- National Archive, Kew 01 May 1909 - 30 September 1909, PRO CO 48/602, Despatches.
- Plaatje, S to Schreiner, WP 13 April 1909. South African Library, MSC27 Box 8, Letter 14301.

### Secondary Sources

- Morton, F, Ramsay, J and Mgadla, TP 2008. *Historical Dictionary of Botswana, Fourth Edition*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press.
- Ramsay, JA 1995. *Child That Does Not Cry Dies in the Cradle: The 1908-10 Campaign to Keep the Bechuanaland Protectorate Out of the Union of South Africa*, Botswana Notes and Records, vol. 27, pp.85-96.

### Newspapers

- Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian* 3 June 1915., 'The Late Mr Joseph Gerrans'.
- Mafeking Mail and Protectorate Guardian*, 20 February 1900 'Special Siege Slip'.

*Royal Cornwall Gazette, Truro 15 July 1909.*

*Sydney Morning Herald 24 January 1900.*

*The Times 24 July 1909.*