

# The Past is Our Country: History and the Rhodesiana Society c. 1953-1970<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper uses the work of an amateur historical society - the Rhodesiana Society – as a lens to explore the racialised nature of attempts to define a white Rhodesian identity in the crucial post-war period of 1953-1970. It builds upon the existing corpus of work on history and national identity, moving beyond the more traditional sites in which historical discourse is produced – academia and the state – looking instead at how individuals in private organisations sought to use the past to shore up identities in the present. It does so using the particularly interesting example of a British settler colony in the late twentieth century, where minority rule was being upheld even as the rest of the continent entered the first stages of its post-colonial life.*

*The paper focuses in particular on discourses of imperial legitimation which stemmed from the earliest history of white British/South African settlement in the colony. Historical work and narratives exploring early conflicts with Africans, specifically the 1896 Mashona and Matabele rebellions, served to legitimate the continued white presence by having shown that they had ‘won’ the country with their own blood. These histories also used techniques of historical silencing, culturally reinforcing the social, legal, and economic segregation which ascribed to Rhodesia’s Africans a state of permanent subservience and anonymity.*

*The paper also suggests how these sanitised narratives of Victorian (white) heroism may have resonated with white Rhodesians in the 1960s, embroiled as they were in their own slowly escalating guerrilla war. Constant reminders of the narratives of triumph in the past offered whites both an historical anchor in the past, despite the majority of the settler community’s origins outside Rhodesia, and also hope that the triumph over the adversity of the late nineteenth century might be replicated in the contemporary conflict.*

## **Introduction**

Explorations of the relationship between history and nationhood often highlight the important role played by the state and professional historians in the formulation of ‘national’ historical narratives which can help foster distinctive national identities.<sup>3</sup> This paper seeks to

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<sup>3</sup> There is an enormous literature on the relationship between history-writing and nationalism. Examples include see – *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, John Breuilly, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, Stefan Berger, ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007);

complement and complicate these perspectives by focussing instead on the work of amateur historians and the role that they play in these processes. The paper does this in the context of white settler society in minority-ruled Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in the period from 1953 to 1970. It explores the work of the Rhodesiana Society, an amateur historical society whose predominant focus upon the history of white settlement and endeavour in the colony provides an opportunity to explore processes of historical silencing and myth-making, and suggests how historical narratives helped to culturally reinforce the social, economic, political, and legal segregation practised in Rhodesia at the time.

### *Historical Context*

Rhodesia in 1953 was a young country. The colony was first settled by pioneers, predominantly from Britain and South Africa, at the very end of the nineteenth century. Under the rule of the British South Africa Company the colony slowly developed and received self-government from the British in 1923 (but remained a colony). This made the settler population more akin to those in the dominions of Australia, Canada and South Africa than other significant British settler colonies such as Kenya.<sup>4</sup> The white population remained negligible at a few thousand until a large influx of immigrants, mainly from Britain, came to the country after the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

The political autonomy enjoyed by the settlers in Rhodesia allowed for the development of a 'Rhodesian' identity. This was nevertheless firmly grounded in British imperial ideals and remained so until after 1965, when the Rhodesian Front government declared independence (U.D.I.) from Britain. Between 1965 and 1980, when it gained

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*National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, Gerard Bouchard, ed. (London: Routledge, 2013); *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power*, George C. Bond and Angela Gillam, eds. (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Dane Kennedy, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) for a comparison.

<sup>5</sup> Donal Lowry, 'Rhodesia 1890-1980 'The Lost Dominion;'' in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons Overseas*, ed. by Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112-140 (123).

independence as Zimbabwe, Rhodesia was in rebellion under white minority rule. The rebellion and constitutional discussions over Dominion-style independence which had preceded it in the 1950s and 1960s offered greater potential and, in the face of independence, greater need for attempts to promote a distinctive national identity for Rhodesians. However, the international context of a decolonising continent complicated these attempts by posing the question of how one might shape a national identity incorporating both the white settlers and African inhabitants of the country. In the event, many Rhodesians chose to ignore this reality altogether, defining what it meant to be ‘Rhodesian’, both historically and in the present, along strict racial lines. It was in this context that the Rhodesiana Society appeared. This paper seeks to explore the Society and its promotion of the history of white settlement in its publication, *Rhodesiana*.

### *The Rhodesiana Society*

The Rhodesiana Society was an amateur historical society founded in 1953 as the Rhodesia Africana Society (RAS). Modelled upon the South African van Riebeeck Society of Cape Town, in 1956 it began to publish a periodical, *Rhodesiana*, which ran for 40 volumes until 1979.<sup>6</sup> In the Constitution of the Society, published regularly in *Rhodesiana*, we can see the evolution of the organisation. In Volume One (1956) the Constitution claimed:

The... [RAS]... has been founded to further the interests of collectors of Rhodesiana, and to assist in the preservation of books and documents relating to the Rhodesias and Nyasaland in particular.<sup>7</sup>

This intention of collecting and preserving ‘Rhodesiana’ was not the only purpose of the Society however, it also promoted the study of and writing upon aspects of Rhodesian history. This was evidenced in the first issue, with a reproduction of a speech given by Sir

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Obituary, H.A. Cripwell and the Founding of the Rhodesiana Society’, *Rhodesiana*, 22 (1970), 1-5 (1).

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Rhodesiana Africana Society – Constitution’, *Rhodesiana*, 1 (1956), 21.

Robert Tredgold on 18 July 1954 at the unveiling of the memorial at the Mangwe Pass, the route through which the pioneers had entered Rhodesia.<sup>8</sup> An apt start, as *Rhodesiana* would overwhelmingly focus upon the history of the colony as a narrative of European achievement and development. Volume Two took a more familiar course with a series of short articles on different aspects of white history in Rhodesia – covering topics such as police pioneer doctors and a biography of a Rhodesian Victoria Cross winner, Frank William Baxter.<sup>9</sup> Yet it was an article by the civil servant Roger Howman: ‘The Effects of History on the African’ which set the tone for the Society’s attitude towards African history.<sup>10</sup> Howman claimed that Africans had lacked any concept of history until recently and were now inventing traditions and legends in the service of African nationalism. It noted, apparently without irony, that the recent relationship between Africans and their history was: ‘a fascinating opportunity to watch just how a people appropriate history for the emotional and political satisfaction it can give them’.<sup>11</sup>

In 1958 the RAS became the Rhodesiana Society and the 1961 *Rhodesiana* added a new objective to its mission statement: ‘to add to the pleasure and knowledge of those interested in the early history of Rhodesia and adjacent territories, to record personal experiences of those days[...]’.<sup>12</sup> W.V. Brelsford, speaking at the Society’s first annual dinner, gave a more explicit elucidation of the purpose of *Rhodesiana* worth quoting at length:

[T]he publication of a journal such as *Rhodesiana* is of inestimable value to a young country especially one where a big proportion are newcomers. For it is essential to use every means in order [...] to try and build a nation. The journal helps show that Rhodesia is

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<sup>8</sup> Sir Robert Tredgold, ‘Address on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Memorial at the Mangwe Pass on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1954’, *Rhodesiana*, 1 (1956), 1-6.

<sup>9</sup> Colonel A.S. Hickman, ‘Some Notes on Police Pioneer Doctors and Others’, *Rhodesiana*, 2 (1957), 3-15; ‘Regulus’, ‘Frank William Baxter, V.C.’, *Rhodesiana*, 2 (1957), 16-28.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Howman, ‘The Effects of History on the African’, *Rhodesiana*, 2 (1957), 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Rhodesiana Society’, *Rhodesiana*, 6 (1961), 41.

a country with a history, with traditions – that it is not just a collection of people from many parts of the world, that Rhodesia has its heroes, its legends, that in its creation there have been acts of bravery and gallantry, that hardships and dangers have been endured. To portray as much of this in word and picture is the task of *Rhodesiana* and the function of the Society is thus to help preserve for posterity the rich heritage of Rhodesia's past.<sup>13</sup>

Who were these members? Glancing through the names on membership lists published semi-regularly in *Rhodesiana* gives an impression of an overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, white and Rhodesia-based membership, with subscribers from a smattering of other countries including Britain, South Africa, and the USA.<sup>14</sup> Despite a considerable increase in membership figures between 1956 (fifty) and 1970 (one thousand two hundred and seven), the figures are still quite small considering the size of the 'European' population of Rhodesia, which was 228,296 in 1969.<sup>15</sup> However, many educational and public institutions were members of the society, suggesting that its impact may have been much wider than these relatively small numbers. In October 1970 some fifty-three schools and colleges across Rhodesia were members of the Society along with the publisher Longmans of Rhodesia, which published history textbooks.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this there were eighteen public libraries subscribing in Rhodesia and South Africa and twenty-six university libraries, predominantly in the US.

This suggests that the Rhodesiana Society may have enjoyed an influence and exposure far in excess of its membership numbers thanks to its relationship with public bodies and a number of universities around the world. Furthermore, this was an organisation dedicated to actively promoting the history of white settlement in Rhodesia and circulating it amongst a wider audience by presenting authoritative academic-style articles in *Rhodesiana*

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<sup>13</sup> 'The First Annual Dinner', *Rhodesiana*, 16 (1967), 86-7 (86).

<sup>14</sup> 'List of Members of the Rhodesiana Society As At 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1970', *Rhodesiana*, 23 (1970), 89-97.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Strack, *Sanctions: The Case of Rhodesia* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1978), 196.

<sup>16</sup> 'List of Members of the Rhodesiana Society, As At 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1970', 89-98.

and also through lectures held by the society's branches based in Salisbury, Bulawayo and Umtali.<sup>17</sup>

Yet *Rhodesiana* was not the only publication which was devoted to the history of the country. The history faculty of the University College of Rhodesia produced the scholarly journal *Rhodesian History* which provides an academic perspective on the Society. In 1972 John MacKenzie reviewed *Rhodesiana* volume twenty-three, a special issue reproducing a series of lectures given in Bulawayo by the Matabeleland Branch. MacKenzie was less than impressed by the academic rigour of the so-called 'experts':

The result is an extraordinary rag-bag of ill-designed material, factual inaccuracies and prejudiced ignorance. Some of the contributions are appallingly written... It is difficult to have confidence in a contributor who adds 'I think' to every fact he utters, or in one who admits he could not find his subject in the nineteenth century works consulted because they had no indexes. It is equally difficult to escape the conclusion that publication of these lectures was a mistake [...]<sup>18</sup>

While MacKenzie prefaced this with an acknowledgement that popularising history was a practice that professional historians should welcome he argued that 'popular history must take account of the results of detailed professional research; it must be presented in a lively and elegant way; above all it must of course be factually accurate'.<sup>19</sup> He noted that some of the views presented in the lectures '[do] a disservice to the cause of Rhodesian history and will deter the serious reader', particularly a lecture by Sir Keith Acutt, who argued that Rhodesian history began with Livingstone, not with African civilisations for

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<sup>17</sup> Advert for the Rhodesiana Society, *Rhodesian History*, 3 (1972), 90.

<sup>18</sup> John MacKenzie, 'Review of *Rhodesiana* 29', *Rhodesian History*, 3 (1972), 121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

which there was no written evidence.<sup>20</sup> Thus despite its popularity and claims to expert status, the Society's academic credibility could be questionable, and it is remarkable to note that as late as 1976 the Society had never invited an academic from the University's History Faculty to give a paper before it.<sup>21</sup>

There was also the matter of the focus of the Society's work. Luise White has argued that each different historical narrative 'articulates a world of politics and relationships. Some... seek to silence other confessions or make them seem flawed or fabricated'.<sup>22</sup> *Rhodesiana* rarely sought to engage or showcase African narratives of history and thus wrote them out of the record, silencing them. By first writing Africans *out* of the history of the country and then *back into it* in subordinate roles, popular historical narratives such as those given in the pages of *Rhodesiana* helped give whites a sense of identity and place within contemporary Rhodesia. The relationship between past and present was noted at the time, in 1976 one observer noted: '[t]he primary concern of the Rhodesiana Society has always been the story of the white community. Indeed the impressive membership achieved [...] can be [partially] attributed [...] to the growth of white Rhodesian nationalism'.<sup>23</sup>

With its wide accessibility to the white population, the Rhodesiana Society constituted a key medium through which historical narratives were presented to white Rhodesians. In an observation which could equally be applied to the European population of Rhodesia Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted '[m]ost Europeans and North Americans learn their first history lessons through media that have not been subjected to the standards set by peer reviews, university

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>21</sup> P.R. Warhurst. 'Review of Occasional Paper I: A Record of the Proceedings at a Series of 5 Lectures on Rhodesia 1896 to 1923 – Mashonaland Branch, the Rhodesiana Society, 1976', *Rhodesian History*, 7 (1976), 107-8.

<sup>22</sup> Luise White, *The Assassination of Herbert Chitepo: Texts and Politics in Zimbabwe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Warhurst, 'Review of Occasional Paper I', 117.

presses, or doctoral committees'.<sup>24</sup> Despite this there have been no systematic studies to date of the *Rhodesiana* Society. Yet due to its un-academic nature it was possible for these narratives to be inaccurate, skewed, or downright fallacious. It frequently excluded Africans from the historical narrative or reduced them to anonymous bit players. This reality and Trouillot's work itself, raises questions about the importance of professional historians in the construction of nationalism and national identities, suggesting that non-academic, 'popular' history, instigated not by the state or the academy, plays a critical role in the relationship between history and attempts to create a nation or national identity. We will now turn in greater detail to some of the articles in *Rhodesiana* itself, specifically those which deal with some of the earliest conflicts in the history of Rhodesian settlement; the 1893 Matabele (Ndebele) War and the Ndebele and Shona uprisings of 1896-1897.<sup>25</sup>

### ***The 1893 Matabele War and the 1896-1897 Uprisings in Rhodesiana***

With their central place in the white Rhodesian historical canon, it is unsurprising that the early conflicts with the Ndebele and Shona formed the subject of many articles in *Rhodesiana* throughout the 1960s. There were typically one or more articles dealing with the topic per issue. One of the most common approaches was the re-production of reminiscences which were sent in by readers or friends of authors. These reminiscences, often diaries from the time or recollections years later, were sometimes prefaced with explanatory notes from the editor or a purported authority and other times produced alone. They included Hugh Pollett's diary describing the events of the Mazoe Patrol in the summer of 1896, Mrs M.

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<sup>24</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 20.

<sup>25</sup> See Terence Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7: a study in African resistance* (London: Heinemann, 1967), for one of the more famous but dated interpretations of these conflicts. Ranger's approach has been strongly criticised as simplified pro-African nationalist history by others such as D. N. Beach.



Cripp's recollections of 'Umtali During the Rebellion, 1896' and a lecture by D. Doyle on 'The Rise and Fall of the Matabele Nation' first given in Port Elizabeth in 1893.<sup>26</sup>

The frequent reproduction of these articles gave ample airing to *white* perspectives on the events of 1896-1897 with often little regard or acknowledgement of the motives or even the humanity of their Shona and Ndebele counterparts. This was reflective of the publication's heavy white bias in focus, truly a history written by the victors. Reminiscences were often uncritically presented by the periodical as useful source material. In the case of Doyle's lecture a short preface described the article as having 'special value as source material'.<sup>27</sup> However, the lecture has little value as source material beyond serving as an example of the imperialist justifications used to conquer the Ndebele in 1893, of whom Doyle remarks:

The whole career of the people is marked by deeds of carnage, blood and robbery. Little by little they have sunk in the scale of humanity until today, I know of no natives so utterly lost to all sense of right and virtue as the men and women of Matabeleland.<sup>28</sup>

He goes on to contend, at a time when mopping-up operations were still taking place in Matabeleland, that:

I am sure that posterity will say that one of the greatest works in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the cause of progress, was performed when the Chartered forces wiped out for ever, the Matabele power.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> H. Pollett, 'The Mazoe Patrol', *Rhodesiana*, 2 (1957), 29-38; M. Cripps, 'Umtali During the Rebellion', *Rhodesiana*, 9 (1963), 52-54; D. Doyle, 'The Rise and Fall of the Matabele Nation (1893)', *Rhodesiana*, 14 (1966), 51-60.

<sup>27</sup> Doyle, 'The Rise and Fall', 51.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Doyle, 'The Rise and Fall', 60

This is hardly a model of historical objectivity. Yet perhaps some Rhodesian whites, seeing this as one of the founding moments of their country, would have agreed with Doyle when reading the article in 1966.

Through diary entries and recollections readers saw the white pioneers of the country humanised at their most vulnerable. Stories of murder, betrayal, and hardships all served to anchor the white community. They supplied evidence of the sacrifices whites had to make in ‘winning’ the country and provided justification for retaining control. As the guerrilla war began to escalate in the 1970s Rhodesian whites, still vastly outnumbered by Africans, could claim to be following in the footsteps of their forefathers (despite most of them having no relationship whatsoever to the original pioneers).<sup>30</sup> In contrast Africans typically appear in the accounts only in de-individualised minor supportive or primary antagonistic roles.

However, one might expect this from nineteenth century accounts of the uprisings. Inaccuracies and bias are less excusable in the ‘secondary’ articles which appear in *Rhodesiana*. Though articles by contributors were often fully referenced and occasionally more self-referential they still reproduce many of the biases seen in the reminiscences. This is revealing as it demonstrates how little attitudes had changed since the late nineteenth century. This was in spite of the enormous changes within African society in Rhodesia since the 1890s and also a period of ostensible (if highly ambiguous and insincere) multiracial ‘partnership’ in the Federal period from 1953 to 1963.<sup>31</sup>

Once again the articles focussed almost exclusively on whites during the conflicts. R.C. Howland wrote on the experiences of whites in Alice Mine and the Mazoe Patrol in 1896, regular contributor A.S. Hickman explored Norton District during the Mashona

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<sup>30</sup> A.S. Mlambo, *White Immigration Into Rhodesia; From Occupation to Federation* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2002), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Michael West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe 1898-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); see Antony King, ‘Identity and Decolonisation: the policy of partnership in Southern Rhodesia’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2001), for partnership.

Rebellion, and P.S. Garlake produced an extensive article on *every* pioneer fort constructed in Rhodesia in the period 1890-1897.<sup>32</sup> Hickman's article was typical in its portrayal of the rebellion: telling a tale of violence, betrayal, struggle against impossible odds, and heroism. The tale began with unsuspecting whites, who 'had so little fear that the craven Shona would rise' that they despatched the local soldiery to fight the Ndebele, who rose first.<sup>33</sup> He argued that the Shona rising was instigated by 'witchdoctors and agents of the Matabele rebels', who convinced the Shona that most of the whites had been killed. There followed an account of several Europeans being murdered, Hickman singles out the Norton family – white farmers who were all killed and for whom the district was named. Hickman presents the family's patriarch, Joseph Norton, in a way that most Rhodesians would identify with: individualistic, hard-working, fair but firm. Hickman went out of his way to assume that the Shona had no real cause to resent Norton.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, those Shona who were not murdering innocent whites appeared as another archetype of the rebellion narratives, the terrified servant. Referring to two murders on 16 July 1896, Hickman claimed 'there is a story that a native policeman arrived on the scene whilst the murders were taking place, and fled terrified' thus preventing the Nortons from being warned of an impending attack.<sup>35</sup> By presenting hearsay as historical fact in this way Hickman reinforced the stereotype of the 'craven' Shona. This contrasted with the heroism of the settlers, but also obscured the absolutely crucial role 'friendly' Africans played in the settlers' victory. Despite the oft-cited instances of their fleeing, account after account contains hundreds of African servants, policemen and soldiers fighting on the settlers' side. It was usually these Africans who made daring excursions for water for those

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<sup>32</sup>R.C. Howland 'The Mazoe Patrol', *Rhodesiana*, 8 (1963), 16-33; A.S. Hickman, 'Norton District in the Mashona Rebellion', *Rhodesiana*, 3 (1958), 14-28; P.S. Garlake 'Pioneer Forts in Rhodesia, 1890-97', *Rhodesiana*, 12 (1965), 37-62.

<sup>33</sup> Hickman, 'Norton District', 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

stuck in laagers, manned the barricades for the night watch, or delivered important messages to the highly dispersed white community at great personal risk.

Many of these Africans died in the service of the whites during the 1896-1897 uprisings and yet we know none of their names. Whilst white victims were immortalised on monuments, and in these articles – their names, the time, location, and manner of their deaths endlessly speculated upon – the hundreds of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ who lost their lives remain anonymous and forgotten. Not one of these articles in the 1950s or 1960s commemorated, celebrated, or even seriously acknowledged the important role that Africans had played. Instead, the successful suppression of the rebellion was attributed to white determination and ingenuity in any way possible – thus P.S. Garlake argued that forts were perhaps the most important factor in colonists’ survival to 1897, ignoring the Africans who often garrisoned and almost always built them.<sup>36</sup> In that way, nothing had changed since the late nineteenth century, as Rhodesian society in the 1960s still depended upon the acquiescence of thousands of Africans for its day-to-day operation.

In contrast, Hickman’s article describes the deaths of the Norton family in detail, spending several pages speculating upon how each member of the family and their white assistants (a governess and two farm assistants) were murdered.<sup>37</sup> In doing this Hickman humanises the whites but not their African killers. While it is futile to speculate on the morality of individual actions in the rebellion, it is indicative of the white bias of the narratives that Hickman does not even attempt to look for possible motives on the part of the Shona, instead taking for granted - in a rather Victorian fashion – the Africans’ predisposition to violence.

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<sup>36</sup> Garlake, ‘Pioneer Forts’, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Hickman later devoted an entire article to reconstructing the mysterious death of a prospector at Mazoe in 1896: ‘The Death of Charles Annesty’, *Rhodesiana*, 11 (1964), 93-102.

Hickman's article moves on to describe the classic white story of the 1896-1897 rebellions, the defence of a laager and subsequent patrols to subdue the rebels. These stories often involved the coming-together of prospectors, storekeepers and farmers and their eventual rescue by a patrol of soldiers or policemen. One can draw interesting parallels between these tales from the late nineteenth century and the experience of white Rhodesians in the 1960s and 1970s. Firstly, due to its relative international isolation in the latter period the entire country of Rhodesia was often described as possessing a 'laager mentality', the Southern African twist on the siege mentality. This became more pronounced as the guerrilla war went on into the 1970s, when the landlocked Rhodesia was abandoned by its former allies Mozambique (upon majority rule independence in 1975) and South Africa (after a re-alignment in that country's foreign policy objectives in the late 1970s) and became geographically as well as mentally surrounded.

Another parallel between these historical narratives and UDI-era Rhodesia is the message of unity they present. The story of white survival in 1896-1897 was one of individuals of disparate origins coming together to defend themselves. Articles often emphasise that fact (whilst simultaneously 'silencing' the African contribution and sacrifice) to show how whites came together as 'Rhodesians' for the first time in the country's history. In this way the 1896-1897 rebellion in particular provided an historical precedent for the still highly divided white community of the 1960s to come together in defence of the nation and their way of life even if, as Godwin and Hancock have demonstrated, what exactly this meant was never clear.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Rhodesiana and the National Archives of Rhodesia***

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die: the impact of war and political change on White Rhodesia, c.1970-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), is the standard text describing white disunity.

Was it simply racism, conscious or unconscious, which accounted for this overwhelming white bias in historical writing? It is possible to suggest that there was a more practical aspect to the heavy slanting in the favour of whites which was related to the source material available. Writing his account of the 1896-1897 uprisings, Terence Ranger noted the imbalanced nature of source material available to historians in the National Archives of Rhodesia:

The material which is genuinely illuminating about African society and its participation in the risings is scattered amongst a great mass of material which is not concerned with, or if concerned not perceptive about, Africans at all.<sup>39</sup>

It was from this archive that much of the primary source material for articles in *Rhodesiana* was drawn. The interrogation of sources and the archive are key tenets of the historical profession and as Trouillot has noted, moments of ‘fact assembly (the making of *archives*)’ are a crucial moment where silences enter the process of historical production.<sup>40</sup> Archives, particularly ‘national’ archives, help determine what is historically credible and what isn’t: ‘they convey authority and set the rules for credibility and interdependence; they help select the stories that matter’.<sup>41</sup> Through their uncritical overreliance on a single archive, the amateur historians of *Rhodesiana* reproduced and perpetuated wholesale the unmediated prejudices of the past for a contemporary audience.

To get an impression of how *Rhodesiana*’s contributors often viewed the National Archive, there is an illuminating article from E.E. Burke in 1967 which reflects the claims to credibility and authority that Trouillot has highlighted.<sup>42</sup> Burke argued that ‘[a]n archival collection... has some special quality that distinguishes it from other collections of documents’ and believed that documents contained therein possessed ‘authenticity, and a

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<sup>39</sup> Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, x.

<sup>40</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> E.E. Burke, ‘Archives and Archaeology’, *Rhodesiana*, 17 (1967), 64-70.

certain impartiality'.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, as Deputy Director of the Archives (Director from 1970), Burke had something of a vested interest. He, along with several other prominent staff members at the Archives, had a close connection to the Rhodesiana Society either as members or as contributors to *Rhodesiana*.<sup>44</sup> This close relationship between the two bodies helped to ensure a degree of consistency in the content and character of white Rhodesian history-writing.

### ***Conclusion***

The Rhodesiana Society was a disproportionately influential conduit for amateur historical narratives which enjoyed the membership of prominent individuals and public institutions. In addition to its stated goals of amateur history and preservation the Society consciously sought to use history in processes of nation and identity-making. Thus it provides us with an interesting example of the role amateur history-writing can play in the creation of nationalistic historical narratives.

The particularly close relationship between the Rhodesiana Society and the National Archive demonstrate the intersection of two different sites of production of historical discourse. Both exhibited a biased view of history which privileged the actions and experiences of white settlers above those of Africans. They offered an image of a relationship between the races which saw whites as dominant and Africans as either pliant, faceless, subordinates or savage and unthinking murderers. By reducing or ignoring African contributions to Rhodesian history they elevated the achievements of whites to a level which could continue to be used as a justification for white minority rule in the 1960s and 1970s. This happened despite taking place in a context of African decolonisation, with these amateur historians choosing to ignore continental trends and privilege the white contribution to

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> 'Notes', *Rhodesiana*, 23 (1970), 70

Rhodesian development rather than emphasise that Rhodesia had a history of multiracial co-operation (admittedly in an unequal and colonial context).<sup>45</sup> Reproducing these accounts in the guise of authoritative history, *Rhodesiana* reinforced the credibility of these skewed narratives and increased their prominence among a contemporary audience. This was despite the fact that its historical objectivity and rigour was often highly questionable. The paucity of critical assessments of African motivations or actions was reflective of the society in which the articles were written – a society in which the white population displayed a general ignorance towards Africans. Indeed such exclusive historical narratives strengthened the notion of a Rhodesia divided between (implicitly white) ‘Rhodesians’ and Africans. They provided a cultural reinforcement and historical legitimation of norms enforced by legal, political and economic divisions between the races. Likewise, the narratives of struggle, violence, and ultimate victory in narratives of early events in the country’s history, such as the 1896-1897 uprisings, offered an historical precedent for contemporary whites in their ‘wars’ against sanctions and nationalist guerrillas, which suggested that whites had triumphed against the odds in the past, and could do so again.

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<sup>45</sup> For an example of the inverse, how white settlers were integrated into the historical narratives and contemporary society of a newly independent African state, see James Gibbs, ‘Uhuru na Kenyatta: White Settlers and the Symbolism of Kenya’s Independence Day Events’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42, 3 (2014), 503-529.



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