

FIGHTING AND WRITING: THE RHODESIAN ARMY AT WAR

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I spent most of 2015-16 between projects. Even before *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (University of Chicago Press) was published in March 2015 I had returned to the project I put on the back burner a few years earlier. *Fighting and Writing* is a history of the Rhodesian army at war, the working title of which referred to the extraordinary number of memoirs former combatants have written since the 1990s. Most of the research for this has been done – as I’ve reported in previous research reports- in the Zimbabwe National Archives, the Rhodesian cabinet papers in the Cory Library at Rhodes University in South Africa, and the Rhodesian army papers. These were taken to South Africa in February 1980 and kept in storage lockers until 2002 when they were given to a private museum in Bristol, England, and catalogued (sort of) by volunteers. These were closed to researchers after a dispute about who could archive them, and the museum itself closed shortly thereafter. Because I’ve been working on this so long what began as interviews with former officers or national servicemen to whom I first spoke in 2003 or ’04 have become extended conversations; we have spoken several times over the last twelve years.

I spent the fall of 2015 writing grant proposals, hoping to get time off to write this book. I also went to two conferences: one in Ann Arbor on the impact of E. P. Thompson on African historiography, and the African Studies Association meeting in San Diego where there was a panel on the historiographic impact of my now twenty-five year old book, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (University of Chicago Press, 1990). In the new year I learned I had the great good fortune to be awarded a fellowship at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. I began gearing up for a year’s writing, which meant



finishing an article or two and sorting out what research was left to do. The last piece of the puzzle, for me at least, was the importance of tracking in the Rhodesian army. I had presented a conference paper on that at a conference on hunting held in Cologne the year before, and had used some of the material presented there for an article I had just finished, but over all I had struggled with how important tracking was and how it stood at a node linking ideas about race to ideas about the conduct of the war. Tracking combined any number of ideas about ‘natural’ African skills with the demands of counter-insurgency undertaken by a largely conscript army: Could the men brought up on farms, hunting with African playmates, track as well as Africans could? Could adult Africans, such as national servicemen, be taught to track? And who could teach them? Could African trackers be trusted to remain loyal? In June I was able to interview Allan Savory, who had started and organized the Rhodesian army’s combat tracking unit. Savory lives part of the year in Albuquerque; by time I returned to Gainesville to type up my notes I realized that I had framed my concerns

poorly. Just as Savory made it clear that tracking was not simply a matter of looking down but of looking all around, including up, I realized how narrow my concerns had been. Indeed, once I got settled in North Carolina I wrote the chapter about tracking that had been so difficult before: it had little in common with earlier versions and owed a great deal to my conversation with Savory.

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