



OLIVE SCHREINER (1855 – 1920)



Olive Schreiner. Photograph, 1889, Private Collection.

South African writer Olive Schreiner became internationally famous following the success of her first novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). She went on to publish allegories, numerous social and political treatises, public letters, short stories, and an extended feminist polemic entitled *Woman and Labour* (1911). After Schreiner's death, her husband Samuel Cron Cronwright-Schreiner published her two unfinished novels, *From Man to Man (Or Perhaps Only...)* (1926) and *Undine* (1929), a collection of essays entitled *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923), and a number of unpublished allegories under the title *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923).

Schreiner was born to a missionary couple, Gottlob Schreiner and Rebecca Lyndall, at Wittenberg mission station in South Africa on March 24 1855. Named for her three dead brothers, Oliver, Emile, and Albert, Olive Emilie Albertina Schreiner was the ninth of twelve children. She spent most of her childhood moving between mission stations and received no formal education. The death of Schreiner's sister Ellie in 1865 and a meeting with freethinker Willie Bertram in 1871 led to Schreiner's rejection of religion.

Despite her limited education, Schreiner took up her first governess post in Cradock, South Africa, in 1870. Between 1872 and 1874 she lived with her brother and sister, Theo

and Ettie, at the diamond fields in New Rush. She then returned to working as a governess for various families in the Northern and Eastern Cape from 1874 until 1881.

Starting in the early 1870s, Schreiner taught herself natural history, anthropology, and philosophy, reading works by Charles Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Carl Vogt. She also began work on all three of her novels: *From Man to Man*, *The Story of an African Farm*, and *Undine*. Schreiner quickly decided not to publish *Undine*, recording in her journal that it was a “tissue of faults” (qtd. in Cronwright-Schreiner 128). She completed *African Farm* in 1879 and took it to England in 1881.

Although Schreiner moved to England with the intention of becoming a nurse, her chronic asthma prevented her from study. Instead, she focused on publishing *African Farm*, which she succeeded in doing in 1883. The novel caught the attention of many of London’s radical figures due to its freethinking, feminist, and anti-imperialist themes, and Edward Aveling reviewed it in the journal *Progress* under the heading “A Notable Book.” Schreiner quickly became friends with Edward Carpenter, Bryan Donkin, Eleanor Marx, Karl Pearson, and sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis. Schreiner’s relationship with Ellis would become one of the most important of her life, and they remained in regular contact until her death in 1920. As a result of moving in these radical intellectual circles and attending groups such as the Men’s and Women’s Club and the Fellowship of the New Life, Schreiner began to develop her progressive ideas about gender, race, imperialism, sexuality, and evolution.

Schreiner was also in contact with various poets and writers associated with the aesthetic, symbolist, and naturalist movements in literature. These included Philip Bourke-Marston, Vernon Lee, Amy Levy, George Moore, and Arthur Symons. Symons’s accounts of conversations with Schreiner reveal her intent to create experimental, non-realist literature (see Cronwright-Schreiner 184-90).

Whilst travelling in England and Europe between 1887 and 1889, Schreiner worked on various projects. She continued writing *From Man to Man*, began an introduction to a reprint edition of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and completed a number of allegories that forwarded socialist, feminist, and anti-imperialist

arguments. Four of these were published in *The Woman's World* under the editorship of Oscar Wilde. After Schreiner returned to South Africa in 1889, she published two collections of allegories, *Dreams* (1890) and *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893).

Schreiner's romantic relationships up until 1892 were unsuccessful. At seventeen, she was involved in a mysterious and brief engagement to Julius Gau; in England she rejected an offer of marriage from Donkin, and fell deeply in (unrequited) love with Pearson. In 1892 Schreiner met an ostrich farmer, Samuel Cron Cronwright, who was a fan of *African Farm*. In 1894 they married, and he took her name. The following year, Schreiner gave birth to a daughter, who only survived for sixteen hours. After this, the marriage became more difficult, and the couple would spend much of the next 25 years apart.

From 1890 onwards, Schreiner increasingly focused on her political writings. She published numerous articles in various journals between 1891-1900 on the nature of Boers, various African races, and the English. Cronwright-Schreiner would later collect these essays as *Thoughts on South Africa*. Schreiner also continued to write allegories, the most significant of which was *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897). This satirical story attacked Cecil Rhodes's expansionist and imperialist policies, and asserted Schreiner's pacifist and anti-racist positions.

In response to the increasing hostilities between the Boers and English, Schreiner produced an essay entitled "An English South African's View of the Situation" (1899), which spoke out against the coming conflict. She later wrote two short stories, "Eighteen-Ninety-Nine" and "Nineteen Hundred and One," which depicted the suffering of women in war. They were published after her death in the collection *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923).

Whilst in South Africa, Schreiner moved in pacifist and feminist circles that included Alice Greene, Emily Hobhouse, and Betty Molteno. She also became directly supportive of progressive groups, including the Social Democratic Federation in South Africa, and the Women's Enfranchisement League. In 1911 Schreiner published her feminist polemic, *Woman and Labour*. It demanded "labour and the training which fits for

labour!” for all women, and utilized her own version of evolutionary theory to suggest that only through union and love could equality between the sexes be attained.

Schreiner returned to England in 1913 for treatment for her asthma and was forced to remain in London following the outbreak of the First World War. During this time Schreiner became a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi’s *satyagraha* (passive resistance) movement and was in contact with the prominent suffragette, Sylvia Pankhurst. In 1917, she began to write a book on war. Part of this was published posthumously in *The Nation and Athenaeum* as “The Dawn of Civilisation.”

After living apart from his wife for five years, Cronwright-Schreiner came to England in July 1920 to see her. Despite her poor health, Schreiner returned alone to South Africa, and died in Wynberg, Cape Town, on December 10th 1920. She shares her final resting place on Buffelskop Mountain near Cradock with her husband, baby, and pet dog.

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