

OLIVE SCHREINER : A MEMOIR

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OLIVE SCHREINER, South Africa's greatest creative writer, famous especially for her two great novels—*The Story of an African Farm* and *From Man to Man*—was born one hundred years ago, on March 24, 1855. She died in 1920 after a life filled with suffering, ill-health, and noble endeavour on behalf of the oppressed and exploited: the women, the workers, and the non-white peoples of South Africa. She was born at Wittebergen, a lonely mission station, and her childhood was spent moving from one lonely outpost to another as her father (a missionary)—whose kindness of heart was greater than his ability to support his family and who later forsook the mission field—moved from one centre to another in search of a livelihood. Naturally, under such conditions there was little formal schooling for the children, but Olive Schreiner was a voracious reader. Mill's *Political Economy*, the philosophy of Spencer, the poems of Goethe: all these and many other books far above the comprehension of the average child, she somehow managed to obtain and read. At an early age she had to fend for herself, and her first writing was done while she was working—for £30 a year—as a governess on a farm in the Eastern Cape Province. She was 20 when she had completed *The Story of an African Farm*.

Out of her meagre earnings she struggled to save her fare for a passage to England, her great ambition being to study medicine and qualify as a doctor. At last she managed to save enough, and in 1881 she sailed for Britain. In her portmanteau was the manuscript of *The Story of an African Farm*. Olive Schreiner was poor, unknown and without influence. Nevertheless, her talent demanded recognition: in 1883 *The Story of an African Farm* was published.* The novel was soon acclaimed as a masterpiece by discerning critics, and it has gained the affection of steadily growing numbers of readers in many countries in the 70 years which have passed since then.

It was not only the story and the people of her first book that stirred literary and intellectual London of the eighties. It was, still more, the daring originality of her ideas which at once placed this young governess from the Karroo in the advance guard of European thought. She spoke out with passionate sincerity and eloquence for

*Under a male pseudonym (Ralph Iron) for the first edition.

equal opportunities and rights for women. Effortlessly she swept aside the cobwebs of Victorian convention and ignorance that swaddled the thought of the time. Here was a fresh, clear young voice from Africa, and all that was best in London listened to it. She arrived there in 1881, unheralded and unknown. She came home to South Africa in 1889, it has been written, 'as one who had attracted to herself the wise, the great, the famous, and—what she really set store by—the love of the poor'.

Olive Schreiner registered at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, but continued ill-health forced her to give up the idea of becoming a doctor. From her return to South Africa in 1889, Olive Schreiner's life was one continuous battle for health as she moved from one Cape village to another in search of relief from the crippling attacks of bronchial asthma that pursued her to the end of her days. She died at Matjiesfontein in 1920. Her great novel *From Man to Man* was published in 1926, after her death. It was the book she herself loved best. She spent 40 years revising it.

Olive Schreiner was never amongst those writers who seek to escape from reality into an 'ivory tower' isolated from life and society. Her books themselves enter passionately into the lists in the cause of human freedom. Her pen and, despite her illness, her energies, were always at the service of those who fought for justice in the struggles of the day. Many of those struggles are very much alive today. The bullies and the tyrants may still feel the lash of her fearless pen. . . . *The Story of an African Farm* is full of moving appeals for equality of rights and opportunities for women; it was the cause that then lay closest to Olive Schreiner's heart. But she was far from being a narrow 'feminist', seeing only the 'women's problem' in society. She was the courageous champion of the oppressed, the weak, the exploited, wherever they might be.

When she returned from England to the Cape, she found local politics increasingly dominated by that astute and unscrupulous financier Cecil Rhodes. Her keen perception quickly saw through the demagogy of Rhodes to the bellicose imperialism and greed which led him into increasingly aggressive policies towards the Boer Republics of the north and the African territories beyond and repressive policies towards the non-white population in the Cape Colony itself. Rhodes, at the head of the British South Africa Chartered Company, was conducting an incredibly brutal and shameless war against the African people in Mashonaland (now known as Rhodesia). In her propagandist novel *Trooper Peter*

Halkett of Mashonaland, she pitilessly exposed the cruelty and barbarity of the invaders.

During the South African War of 1899, Olive Schreiner was one of the small minority of English-speaking South Africans who boldly and unhesitatingly denounced the aggression of British imperialism against the Boer Republics. She did not approve of the reactionary attitude of the republics towards their African populations, but she understood clearly the nature of the war, provoked by Rhodes and British capitalism to seize the wealthy Witwatersrand gold mines. In many articles and pamphlets published at the time she demanded self-determination for the Afrikaners, and she was a close friend of Emily Hobhouse, whose great work for the Boer Republics will never be forgotten. In Cape Town in July, 1900, Olive Schreiner made one of her rare appearances on the public platform to denounce, amidst prolonged and enthusiastic applause, the savage cruelties being committed by the imperial troops against the republican civilians.

Every farmhouse which British soldiers are burning down today is a torch lighting the British Empire in South Africa to its doom, she cried, and it is not hard to imagine the effect upon an audience of that frail but dynamic personality filled with indignation and wrath. Too ill to attend other meetings held for same cause, she sent written speeches which were read from the platform.

The crude exploitation, the incessant insults to human dignity and the vicious discrimination against the African people in her day in the so-called 'liberal' Cape Colony, shocked her deeply sensitive nature. The years immediately before 1910 were filled with negotiations between politicians of the four Colonies and Whitehall over the formation of a Union of South Africa, and the terms and conditions thereof. Then, as now, the principal issue in South African politics was the so-called 'Native Question'. Olive Schreiner boldly entered this controversy with her pamphlet *Closer Union* (1909). Looking towards the coming federation of the colonies, she declared unequivocally:

I am of the opinion that where the franchise is concerned no distinction of race or colour should be made between South Africans. I believe that an attempt to base our national life on distinctions of race and colour as such will prove fatal to us.

But the Liberal Parliament at Westminster passed the South Africa Act of 1910—the present constitution—which marred the Union from birth with the ugly stigmata of the *herrenvolk* ideology.

Olive Schreiner hated war. 'If the use of force is ever justified, it is justified in fighting against social oppression', she wrote. But the brutal slaughter of imperialist wars filled her with horror. She wrote of imperialism as a 'deadly disease which increases its virulency in proportion as it is extended over ever more distant spaces more diverse multitudes till it becomes the death shroud of the nations'.

'Oh Emily', she wrote to Emily Hobhouse in October, 1914, 'the worst of war is not the death on the battlefields, it is the meanness, the cowardice, the hatred it awakens.' When she was well enough she attended anti-war meetings in London, and spoke with contempt of those timid speakers who seemed to be concerned with 'winning' the war rather than ending it. When Bernard Shaw, who had supported the war, wrote a letter to the *National* admitting that Britain and France too, would have invaded Belgium, she commented biting in a letter to Havelock Ellis: 'Bernard Shaw can speak the truth sometimes'.

She was bitterly opposed to the war of intervention against the young Socialist Soviet Republic, the advent of which in 1917 she had warmly welcomed. In 1920 British dockers struck work and refused to load a ship with arms for the Polish war of intervention against the Soviets. 'I am so glad', she wrote to a friend, 'the labour men wouldn't load that ship with guns for the Poles to kill the Russians with. I think this last affair with the Poles is the wickedest thing in the war.'

Olive Schreiner was a revolutionary by nature and intellectual conviction. She hated cruelty and violence more than anything, but at the same time understood well that no people could win freedom without fighting for it. In 1912 she wrote to a friend:

I am not so anxious for women to get the vote as that they should keep on fighting for it. It is the struggle that educates. A degraded or subject race or class gains more from a fight for freedom than by having it given to them.

During her first visit to Europe in the 'eighties, she moved among the most advanced and progressive and socialist circles. She was an intimate friend of Eleanor Marx. In a message read to a Cape Town meeting in 1906, she referred in glowing terms to

Karl Marx, the great German socialist and leader, who died only 27 years ago—a man of transcendent mental ability. . . . Yet this man chose to devote his whole life and his mighty gifts only to developing those lines of thought which would result in benefit to mankind, and he chose poverty and exile—poverty so extreme that he, with his highly cultured wife and

their young children, was often exposed to extremes of physical want—rather than resign the services of his great ideals.

She had a firm grasp of the basic conceptions of the labour movement, and there can be no doubt that but for her ever-present illness she would have played a more active part in it. She wrote a message to a demonstration of shop assistants in Johannesburg encouraging them to continue their efforts towards organisation. 'A just return to the worth of his labour should be made to the worker', she wrote. 'The man who lives and grows wealthy on underpaid human labour is essentially a parasite.' That was written in 1905. There is not a word which the trade union movement would not do well to ponder today, 50 years later. She saw too, the role which colour prejudice might play in disrupting the labour movement:

Our labouring class is divided sharply from the employing class by the line of colour. . . . Any attempt on the part of our labouring class to better its position or resist oppressive exactions, being undertaken mainly by men of one colour against men of another will immediately awaken, over and above financial opposition, racial prejudice, so that even those white men whose economic interests are identical with those of the black labourer, may be driven by race antagonism to act with the exactors.

To Olive Schreiner, the victory of the Russian Socialist revolution spelt the dawn of a new era for humanity. Her husband wrote in his biography of the 'almost unbounded admiration of Lenin' which she expressed to him, to Havelock Ellis and others. 'She looked upon Lenin', wrote Cronwright, 'as incomparably the greatest—if not the only great—man the European situation had produced, and as a statesman of outstanding genius.'

Nothing is more embarrassing to the leaders of bourgeois respectability than those men and women of genius who refuse to accept their conventions and their gods, who look forward with daring revolutionary vision, to a better future. Neglected and persecuted in their lives, after their death their memory is either defiled and be-spattered; else their names are 'sanctified' while their real living thought is distorted or committed to oblivion. Olive Schreiner's memory has been subjected to both these processes. *The Story of an African Farm* has too great an international reputation to be buried, but the rest of her work, especially her magnificent posthumous novel *From Man to Man*, is almost inaccessible. We need have no fears, however, that malice can ever damage, or deliberate neglect annihilate the work of Olive Schreiner: it is part of the inheritance of the people of our country, and nothing is more certain than that they will rediscover it for themselves.