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ESSAY REVIEW

OLIVE SCHREINER AND THE LIBERAL TRADITION*

MANY CLAIMS HAVE been made for Olive Schreiner (1855–1920): a pioneer feminist, socialist, and South Africa's greatest novelist. Her association with Cecil Rhodes and the rule of his Chartered Company has received less attention, not least in First and Scott's recent biography, while her influence on later critics of colonial administration in Zimbabwe, such as Arthur Shearly Cripps, referred to in Chennell's recent study,¹ still awaits more detailed discussion.

First and Scott bring a wide range of skills to their task. Ruth First has had a long and distinguished career as a journalist, political activist and radical historian both inside and outside South Africa; her younger collaborator, Ann Scott, adds the necessary feminist credentials. As a result their work explores more of the facets of this complex woman than those of her earlier biographers, which either lacked a vital dimension or gave undue emphasis to a particular aspect of her life and work. Both in his biography and in his edited collection of letters, her husband, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner,² heavily censored many details of her life prior to their marriage in 1894, with the apparent connivance of Henry Havelock Ellis; and as First and Scott show (pp. 315–19) glossed over the last troubled years of their marriage itself. Both Hobman and Buchanan-Gould³ engage in personal attacks on Cronwright-Schreiner's alleged incomprehension of his wife's genius, while more recently Meintjes⁴ has indulged in speculation, about her relations with Havelock Ellis, Julius Gau ('Zaar' in Buchanan-Gould), Karl Pearson and others, that at times borders on the prurient. One great virtue of the present work is that it has demonstrated with reference to the actual text of Olive Schreiner's correspondence (e.g., on Gau, pp. 62–3) that this is pure speculation. Moreover, neither Hobman nor Meintjes really shows much sympathy with her political views.

A further virtue in the present work is that instead of assuming prior knowledge on the part of their readers, as earlier biographers have done, the authors have gone to the trouble of providing the necessary historical background material. For instance, their survey of the nascent socialist movement in London during the 1880s represents the first real attempt in the literature on Schreiner to explain what were, for example, the Fellowship of the New Life and the Men and Women's Club, and why they appealed to the young Olive Schreiner. A similar depth of background is given for South Africa and it is only in the case of *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, discussed below, that the historical aspect of the biography is notably deficient in detail.

On the other hand, the nature of the authors' political commitment is in itself

*R. First and A. Scott, *Olive Schreiner* (London, Deutsch, 1980), 384 pp., £9.95.

¹A.J. Chennells, 'Introduction', in G.R. Brown, A.J. Chennells and L.B. Rix (eds), *Arthur Shearly Cripps: A Selection of His Prose and Verse* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1976), 13–25.

²S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (London, Unwin, 1924), and *The Letters of Olive Schreiner* (London, Unwin, 1924).

³D.L. Hobman, *Olive Schreiner: Her Friends and Times* (London, Watts, 1955); V Buchanan-Gould, *Not without Honour: The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner* (London, Hutchinson, 1948).

⁴J. Meintjes, *Olive Schreiner: Portrait of a South African Woman* (Johannesburg, Keatland, 1965).

a serious limitation. They have adopted an explicitly 'marxist-feminist' (p. 347) approach to her literary output, which has spilled over into the historical and personal matrices of their biography. They have given rather too much emphasis to Schreiner's relationship with mainstream Marxist thought, consequently minimizing or overlooking other important formative influences upon her political philosophy.

One of these was mid-Victorian liberalism, expressed in a forthright and very characteristic individualism: 'If I thought Socialism would bring the subjection of the individual to the whole I would fight to the death', she averred in 1885 in a letter to Havelock Ellis.⁵ And again: 'Socialism is only one-half of the truth, individualism is the other half'.⁶ It is questionable whether Olive Schreiner was ever a socialist in the modern sense: her intellectual taproot was too firmly embedded in the soil of early and mid-Victorian liberalism and humanitarianism. Her idols were J.S. Mill and Sir George Grey,⁷ not Marx and Engels.

A second and even more potent influence on Olive Schreiner derived from the circumstances of her own childhood. Commentators have described how she reacted against the claustrophobic environment and her repressive upbringing on the South African missionary frontier, rejecting the religious dogma inculcated by her parents. But none has fully assessed the lifelong ethical effect of such a childhood on her adult writings and philosophy. She embraced with additional fervour the moral teachings of Christianity, probably as a form of compensation for unbelief in its theological doctrine. Her works are charged with a powerful emotion which can only be described as love—especially for the underdog and the downtrodden.

Another childhood legacy was a mysticism that at times bordered on deism, and is evident especially in the allegories, the best of her writings. It is a quality that has led some critics to query her professed agnosticism.⁸ First and Scott comment fairly liberally on its occurrence in her literary output but say little about its application to her personal life. There is no doubt that this spiritual (using the word in a philosophical, not religious, sense) aspect of her character circumscribed her socialism even more than her insistence upon the individual. 'I haven't faith in anything that promises to raise us by purely material means', she told Ellis in 1884, adding that money taken from the rich would inevitably corrupt the poor.⁹ Although she later retreated from this extreme view, which coincided with that expressed by F.D. Maurice and the Christian Socialists during the 1850s,¹⁰ she seems consistently to have regarded the undue concern with things material, as opposed to spiritual (in a philosophical sense), as the chief hazard facing modern mankind. Like many liberals of the period, Olive Schreiner had abundant faith in the power of the human conscience to prevail over greed and selfishness if given the

⁵ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, 67.

⁶ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner*, 180, quoting O. Schreiner, journal entry for 'Monday', [29] Jan. 1888.

⁷ The dedicatee of *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*.

⁸ e.g., Hobman, *Olive Schreiner*, 15.

⁹ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, 18.

¹⁰ See M.B. Reckitt, *Maurice to Temple: A Century of the Social Movement in the Church of England* (London, Faber, 1947), esp. 19–112, and G.C. Binyon, *The Christian Socialist Movement in England* (London, S.P.C.K., 1931), 50–94.

opportunity to do so. Thus she saw the South African War of 1899–1902 as an attempt by the forces of materialism to capture the productive capacity of South Africa for the gratification of a handful of ‘speculators’,¹¹ which could have been prevented had the ‘Jekyll’, rather than the ‘Hyde’ of England been awake during the earlier 1890s.¹²

First and Scott are rather uneasy about Olive Schreiner’s attachment to Social Darwinist ideas, remarking that ‘her position on race was made ambiguous by her attachment to social Darwinism’ (p. 277). Certainly it is not difficult to find corroborative evidence of this in her earlier works. But, taking into account the various influences on her development in the 1870s and 1880s, it would have been surprising had she remained entirely untouched. For better or worse, evolutionism had become the creed of many who had abandoned Christianity after the great debates following the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). It offered—at least to the Anglo-Saxons of the mid to late Victorian age—a scientific, rational and optimistic vista of the future that had great appeal to the young Olive Schreiner establishing her intellectual roots in London. Almost inevitably she was affected to some extent by the more dubious offshoots of the new philosophy: scientific racism, eugenics and Social Darwinism. It should be noted that one of her most intense, though wholly platonic, relationships, was with Karl Pearson, whose influence runs through much of her earlier non-fiction output. An interesting feature of his philosophy, not mentioned by First and Scott, was his attempt to synthesize within a Social Darwinist framework the ultimately contradictory notions of socialism at home (albeit of an evolutionary, not revolutionary, form) with imperial expansion abroad.¹³

However, it can be argued that once she returned to South Africa, the frankly racist elements of her thought became submerged beneath a more generous and less dogmatic outlook. The main vehicle for her crasser opinions on non-White races is *Thoughts on South Africa*, most of which was written in the very early 1890s, although even here they are qualified by an expressed sense of duty and a typically passionate expectation: ‘We will treat him as if we loved him; and in time the love may come’.¹⁴ By 1897, she had moved to a new urgency and sense of personal involvement, summed up in a letter to Merriman surprisingly overlooked by First and Scott:

We shall reach the bottom at last, probably amid the horrors of war with our native races, then not the poor savage, but generous races whom we might have bound to ourselves by a little generosity and sympathy.¹⁵

What occasioned the change? Could it be that the much maligned Cronwright-Schreiner was the principal agent? He had excellent ‘liberal’ credentials: in 1894,

¹¹ O. Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa* (London, Unwin, 1923), 310.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246.

¹³ On Pearson, see B. Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895–1914* (London, Unwin, 1960), 35–42. On Social Darwinism and scientific racism, see esp. P. D. Curtin (ed.), *Imperialism: Selected Documents* (London, Macmillan, 1971); C. H. Lyons, *To Wash an Aethiopian White: British Ideas about Black African Educability, 1530–1960* (New York, Teachers’ College Press, 1975); D. A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians* (Leicester, Leicester Univ. Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, 361.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hobman, *Olive Schreiner*, 156.

shortly after his marriage, Tengo Jabavu unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to stand for the Cape Assembly.

Once the cause of the other South African 'underdogs', the Boers, had been served by the grant of self-government to the former republics, Olive Schreiner's sympathy for what was evidently becoming the opposing cause of South Africa's Blacks became dominant. First and Scott are surely wrong in dismissing her sympathy as a mere 'protective, patronizing attitude that grew as much from her isolation as her altruism' (p. 339). At worst, this is rather a cheap sneer at the admittedly unfashionable gospel of liberalism. But more to the point it is further evidence of the authors' failure to appreciate her very wholehearted, emotional identification with causes, combined with a thwarted maternal instinct. The authors say very little about the latter, beyond reporting the death of her baby shortly after its birth in 1895 and her subsequent miscarriages. There is abundant evidence in her correspondence of a mothering impulse and indeed her devotion to causes was often expressed in such terms. 'I wish I was large and strong and could put my arms round all the tired lonely women in the world and help them', she exclaimed to a friend.¹⁶ Taking into account the climate of racial attitudes of the time, her views during the last two decades or so of her life can be described only as highly progressive; the earliest references to 'child races' are absent from her later writings. Yes: perhaps she was unduly 'protective' (p. 339), but given the reality of contemporary White imperialism and its manifestations there was a great deal from which to protect non-White races, especially in Southern Africa; and the response was typical of the woman herself.

One manifestation of contemporary White imperialism was a rapacious mining capitalism, personified up to his death in 1902 by Cecil John Rhodes. First and Scott deal rather cursorily with the Schreiner-Rhodes relationship, and do not fully explore its complex and, on Olive Schreiner's side, ambiguous character. Despite its comparatively brief compass, Marion Friedmann's introduction to the recent reprint of *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* more successfully captures the flavour of their relationship.¹⁷ The basic point is that Schreiner consistently distinguished between Rhodes 'the man of genius'¹⁸ and Rhodes the capitalist. She felt that the potential for good of the first was being destroyed by the second. Not that this was the result of Marxist dialectics: as was indicated above, her ideological position was that of J.A. Hobson and the 'liberal tradition'.¹⁹ Indeed it is important to remember that the initial breach with Rhodes was over his support of the notorious so-called 'Strop Bills' of 1890 and 1891, and the disparaging way in which he referred to his subordinates, rather than his activities as a capitalist in Kimberley and Southern Zambezia. Right to the end of his life she seems to have believed that Rhodes had the capacity to solve the major issues of the day in South Africa and so redeem himself. In a letter to Cronwright-Schreiner in October 1894 she expressed 'strong . . . personal admiration for Rhodes's genius', even though she equally strongly 'detested' his methods.²⁰ Shortly after his death,

¹⁶ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, 156 (to J.H. Philpot, 17 Mar. 1889).

¹⁷ O. Schreiner, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (Johannesburg, Donker, 1974; page references in the text below are to this edition), 9-25.

¹⁸ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, 179 (to Ellis, 16 Mar. 1890).

¹⁹ See J.A. Hobson, *The War in South Africa* (London, Nisbet, 1900), 230, 292.

²⁰ Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, 216.

she wrote to a friend: 'When death comes one forgets all the faults of a life and remembers only the awful tragedy of the individual Soul—a great "might have been"'.²¹

Olive Schreiner's main contribution to Zimbabwean literature is her novel—'morality' is perhaps a more accurate description—*Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897). Regarded purely as a work of literature it has serious shortcomings: it is too ready to preach and it is often long-winded. Beyond quoting a lengthy passage from it and discussing her fears of reprisals from the Chartered Company, First and Scott offer little comment, in contrast to their detailed criticism of her South African novels (pp. 84–107; 172–8). The historical context receives a potted and sometimes inaccurate treatment in a footnote (p. 225) which stops at the Risings of 1896 themselves. Friedmann's introduction is more satisfactory in this respect, although it adds little further data about the sources available to the author when she wrote her work. Friedmann refers to F. S. Sykes's book *With Plumer in Matabeleland* (1897),²² which describes the hanging of spies in Bulawayo (cf. *Trooper Peter Halket*, pp. 50–1, quoted in First and Scott, p. 227). But at least two descriptions of this notorious incident would have been available to Olive Schreiner before her book was available for publication. The first appeared in the (London) *Daily Graphic* for 8 May, 1896, and was written by an anonymous 'young tradesman' who actually owned the Fife Street property on which the 'hanging tree' stood. The second, published in the *Independent and Nonconformist*, was reprinted by Labouchère's weekly, *Truth*, on 18 June 1896. It closely parallels Sykes's account and is worth quoting *in extenso*:

Yesterday three natives were hung for being spies. They were marched out of town about half a mile. Ropes were tied to branches of a tree. They were made to climb up, the rope was tied to their necks, and they were made to jump off the tree and drop. One would not for some time; he would talk to Mr. Colenbrander, who, asked him at last, 'Can you see Bulawayo?' The nigger said, 'Yes.' So Mr. Colenbrander said, 'Have a good look at it, for you will never see it again'. So he did, then said, 'Good-bye Mr. Colenbrander', then jumped off. The cheek of the sweep amazed me. They are still hanging as a warning to spies and natives.

References to the other abuses in Company administration mentioned in the novel may be found in the contemporary radical and liberal press: the shooting of women and children, extortion of labour and securing of women for immoral purposes.²³ One incident, the murder of a wounded African being treated by an English doctor,²⁴ bears some resemblance to the denouement of *Trooper Peter Halket*. Olive Schreiner's work is thus not the polemic slenderly attached to reality that its contemporary critics alleged: rather, it is an intuitive insight into the repression, injustice and inhumanity of early Chartered Company rule that hews

²¹ Quoted in Buchanan-Gould, *Not without Honour*, 184.

²² (London, Constable, 1897).

²³ e.g., *Spectator*, 13 and 20 June 1896. *Trooper Peter Halket* was published in February 1897, and so the other main contemporary broadside against the Chartered Company (J. Y. F. Blake, 'Native Rhodesia', *National Review* (30 Oct. 1897), 217–25), was not used as a source of information by Olive Schreiner, although there are some close parallels between them.

²⁴ Reported in *Truth*, 3 Sept. 1896.

close to the thread of actual events though the author herself only visited the country very much later.

Schreiner's novel has had a seminal influence on later Zimbabwean writers, most immediately Arthur Shearly Cripps, who was profoundly affected by the so-called 'Suppressed Frontispiece' (showing the hanged Ndebele 'spies') that appeared only in the work's first edition. Chennells associates Cripps's pervasive figure of the Black Christ with Schreiner's 'Stranger', whom the reader very quickly identifies as Jesus Christ.²⁵ Schreiner's influence is strongest in the novels that Cripps wrote before the 1914-18 War: Stephen Gore of *The Brooding Earth* (1911) could be a younger cousin of Peter Halket, although unlike him he undergoes no change of heart. Like the Schreiner opus, this novel and its successor *Bay-Tree Country* (1913)²⁶ are vehicles for the expression of a passionate indignation rather than canvasses upon which real flesh-and-blood people are painted. The tradition of protest was continued by Doris Lessing, who has acknowledged the scope of Schreiner's influence upon her.²⁷ However, in contrast to Schreiner and Cripps, her Rhodesian novels are cool, detached and tinged with a subtle irony: perhaps that is why Lessing's criticisms of settler society in the 1930s and 1940s come across so effectively. The true heirs of the Schreiner-Cripps spirit of indignation are more recent African writers like Stanlake Samkange²⁸ and the young author Dambudzo Marechera.²⁹

To sum up, First and Scott's new biography represents a useful forward step in the study of Olive Schreiner. Its main defect is an undue concentration on her intellectualism and political commitment. More of the real Olive Schreiner appears in Phyllis Grosskurth's recent biography of Havelock Ellis,³⁰ which incidentally has some useful information about her medical history. It may be argued that a cooler, more cerebral approach is justified, if only to offset her husband's unflattering portrayal of an indecisive, cantankerous, eccentric and, above all, selfish woman, who lacked the necessary self-discipline to realize her great literary potential.³¹ But too much of the essential Olive Schreiner is missing from First and Scott's rather flat and matter-of-fact account: the young girl in the throes of agnosticism playing the role of Elijah and willing God to consume a sacrifice with fire; the ageing and ailing woman who compensated for a childless marriage by travelling with an entourage of pets. A satisfying synthesis of Olive Schreiner the intellectual and Olive Schreiner the woman still remains to be achieved.

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²⁵ Chennells, 'Introduction', 22.

²⁶ Both novels have been reprinted in Brown, Chennells and Rix, *Arthur Shearly Cripps*.

²⁷ D. Lessing, 'Introduction', in O. Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (New York, Schocken Books, reprint edn, 1976), 2.

²⁸ *On Trial for My Country* (London, Heinemann, 1967), *Year of the Uprising* (London, Heinemann, 1978), and esp. *The Mourned One* (London, Heinemann, 1975).

²⁹ *House of Hunger* (London, Heinemann, 1978).

³⁰ P. Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis: A Biography* (London, Allen Lane, 1980).

³¹ See esp. Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner*, 269.