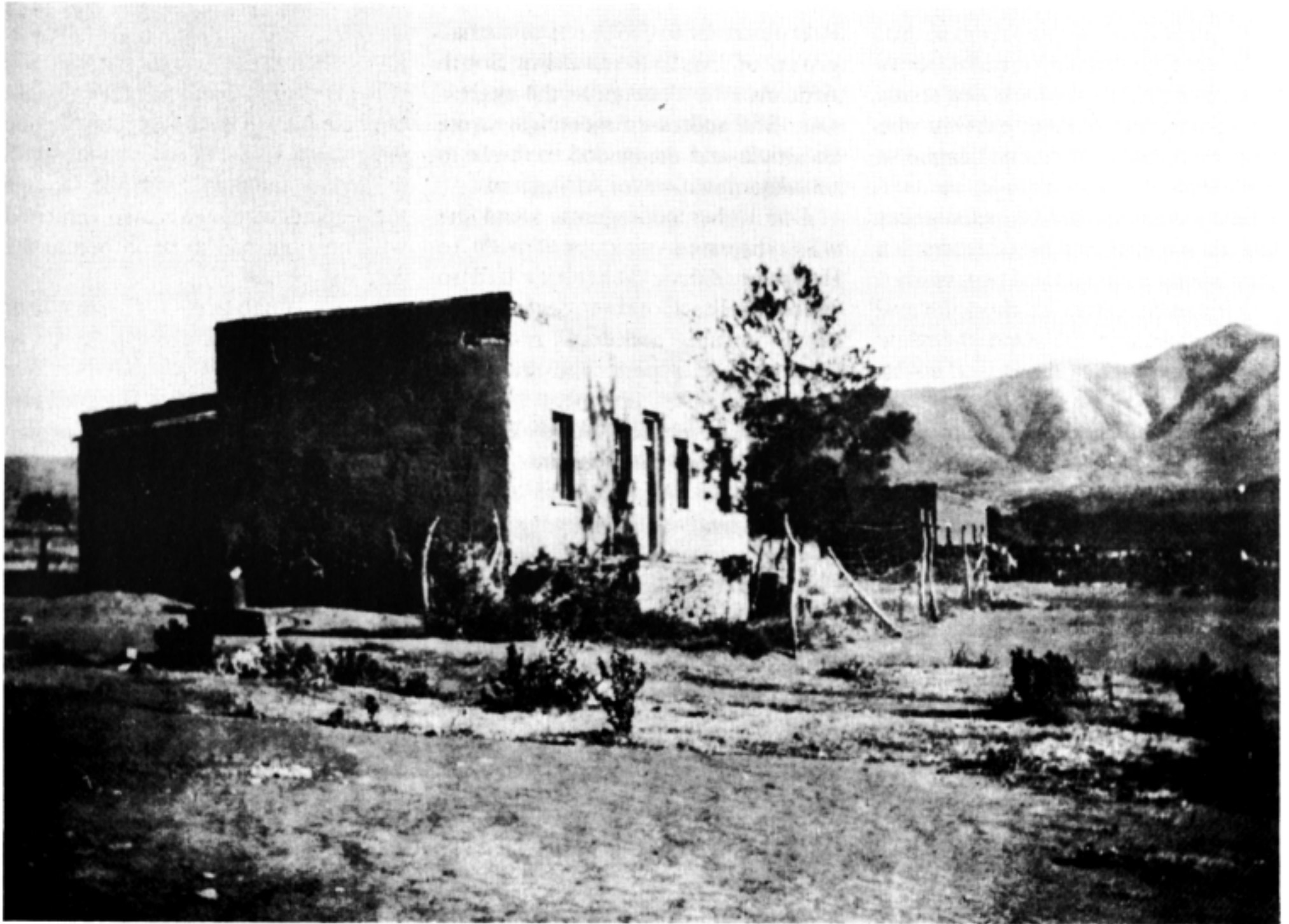


Olive Schreiner

This article was written by RAY ALEXANDER in 1965 prior to her forced departure from South Africa, for a book edited by Zelda Friedlander entitled *Until the Heart Changes: a Garland for Olive Schreiner*.



OLIVE SCHREINER was born on the March 24, 1855 at the Witterbergen mission station in what was to become the Herschel district of the Cape Colony.

She had a deep, compassionate sympathy with the common people. Her talents, activities and her marriage gave her entrée to the inner circles of the South African establishment. Yet, she never allowed her associations with Rhodes, Merriman, Sauer, Molteno and other leading members of the Cape Society to blunt her sense of human values or to betray her principles.

A great humanist, courageous writer and eloquent speaker, she used her charm and talent to champion the cause of the oppressed and

denounced social injustice. That is why her ideas ring as true and fresh today as when she expressed them 60 years ago.

She identified herself, in particular, with three causes: the feminist movement, anti-imperialism and the protest against racial oppression.

She was drawn into the suffragette movement during her stays in England (1881-1891, 1893-4, 1913-1920) where she associated with Sylvia Pankhurst, Havelock Ellis, Bernard Shaw, the Pethick Lawrences, Edward Carpenter, M. W. Nevinson, Eleanor Marx and other leaders of advanced thought. There she broadened her vision and gained insight into the social forces that were to erupt in World War I and the

Cawoods farm at Ganna Hoek, Cradock, where Olive Schreiner completed the first draft of 'Story of an African Farm'

Russian Revolution.

She identified at the outset with the battle of the English women for the vote and the removal of disabilities. As she observed in a letter of March 1909 to Pethick Lawrence, the importance of the movement was the work done in 'Educating women and indeed the world to know what women can do'.

She gave artistic expression to her resentment of women's disabilities and humiliation suffered at the hands of males in her book *Women and Labour* and *From Man To Man*. She

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gave practical expression to her resentment and to her desire to change womens' outlook and status by taking an active part in the Womens Enfranchisement League in the Cape in 1908.

She combined her life as a writer and her activities as a public leader in a harmonious and integrated personality.

The same unity of thought and action appears in the stand she made against the attack of the British on the

Boer Republic in 1899, one of a small group of English-speaking South Africans who denounced the aggression. She addressed meetings, wrote an article and demanded the right to self-determination for Afrikaners.

Due to her courageous stand she was interned and confined to Hanover. Olive Schreiner had to report to the Commander's office every morning and could not leave town without a pass. The town was

surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. She suffered badly from asthma and was allowed to have a light all night but had to keep the blinds closed. She went for walks into the koppies with the Visser families (from the Orange Free State who were also interned with her) but had to be in before the gate was closed (1).

Her husband, Cronwright Schreiner, was not given a permit to leave Cape Town to visit her, her home in Johannesburg was looted and her manuscript *Women and Labour* was burnt in the process.

She hated wars against Black people as much as against Whites. The invasion of Mashonaland by Rhodes' Pioneers revolted her. She gave creative expression to her sentiment in a book *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) in which she indicted Rhodes, who had been a personal friend of hers. This work still stands as a notable exposure of colonialism and its brutalities against an innocent and defenceless African people. It was not only colonialism that she rejected. Her deep and abiding faith in humanity led her to reject any social system rooted in racial discrimination and social injustice. In her comment on *Closer Union*, written in October 1908, she proclaimed her belief in the principle of a common franchise with no restriction of race or colour for all South Africans.

'All persons born in the country or permanently resident here should be one in the eye of the state. Any attempt to base our national life on distinctions of race and colour, as such, will after the lapse of many years, prove fatal.'

She identified herself with the cause of the common man throughout the world. Few South Africans of her time had her understanding of the underlying causes of tension and conflict in Tzarist Russia. In 1905, on the

Below: Schreiner (centre standing) at Eastbourne, April 1881, shortly after arriving in England Above right; Schreiner with Samuel Cronwright Schreiner, 1894 Right; portrait of Olive Schreiner





occasion of the mass meeting in Cape Town, organised by the Socialist Democratic Federation to express sympathy with the Russian Revolution, Olive, unable to attend,

wrote what her thoughts were:

'With those who in far-off Russia are today carrying on the age-long war of humanity towards a larger freedom and a higher justice, a war which has been waged through the ages, now by this people and then by that; now a small nation against one that would subjugate it; then by a class; then by a race; now for religious freedom then for the right of free thought and speech; but which when looked at from the highest, has always been essentially one battle, fought with one end, now with success and then with seeming failure; but always bringing nearer by the minute and imperceptible degrees that time in the future, when a free and united

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humanity, a truly human life shall be possible on earth. Today the great is passing into the hands of the most Russian people. With how much of immediate success or failure the battle will be fought, we cannot say; but that it will be with it is not success we know and that is a battle not fought for themselves alone, but for all the world, with purpose we know also.'

In a letter prophetic insight, she ended her letter expressing her belief:

'In this movement in Russia we are witnessing the beginning of the great event that has taken place in the last history of humanity during the nineteenth century.'

In the same year, she addressed a letter to Johannesburg shop assistants which was received by the meeting with great applause. Her letter reads as follows: 'I am glad to hear of your meeting in Johannesburg for several reasons. I am glad because it shows that at last we in South Africa are, in among making up to take our place with other civilized nations in the sound struggle for healthier and better conditions of labour. I am glad that in your meeting men and women are combined, because men and women are the right and left sides of humanity, capable of moving anywhere together and nowhere alone. I am specially glad that women workers are taking their place in this meeting, because, as the most poorly paid and heavily pressed section of workers - denied in all but a few enlightened societies.... even that small means of making her wants felt which the exercise of the franchise give to the other tax paying workers in free countries, it is especially necessary that women workers should learn solidly to combine.

'I hope your meeting will be large and successful. Remember it is not for yourself alone that you are work-

ing. It may seem a small thing for a shop girl in Johannesburg to be asking a few a few shillings more, or a room with decent air, but what each one is doing is really a great thing. You are taking part in a great movement that is going on in the countries all over the world, to benefit and make more fair and healthful women's conditions of life and if you should personally have to live and suffer by the part you play, remember you are not playing it for yourself alone. It seems a small part: remember it is really large.'

(3) Olive Schreiner is therefore regarded with great esteem by all progressive people in our country.

FOOTNOTES

1. Letter from Mr. Hugh Vimpany Senior. Aged 91, the oldest living resident of Hanover.
2. S.A. News 6/2/1905
3. S.A. News

Ray Alexander has written for the International Labour Organisation in Lusaka since 1968. She was the first national secretary of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) and played a leading role in organising the Food & Canning Workers' Unions (FCWU) of which she was a General-Secretary until the regime banned her from trade union work in 1953.

