

## RUTH SCHECHTER: FRIEND TO OLIVE SCHREINER

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### *The Intellectual as Socialist*

In tracing the history of socialism in South Africa, historians have previously searched through the records of political group's, trade union organisations and the lives of leading left-wing politicians. The works based on these researches (or reminiscences) provide the bare bones of the history of the left in South Africa. What is missing is the study of the socialist intellectuals and their ideas in this political current, both for their contributions and for the problems introduced by an intelligentsia who saw so clearly the evils of colour discrimination but conceived only dimly its relation to class exploitation.

It is not always obvious where this study should begin or which subjects this investigation should cover. There seems to be no obvious thinker to whom the researcher can turn: few if any people equal in calibre to the leading socialist thinkers in Europe or the USA in the late 19th or early 20th century. Yet such men and women must have been present for the movement to have come into existence, gained ground and continued for almost a century. What appears in the histories, and this is at least partly correct, is that some of the ideas translated into socialist programmes came from immigrants at the turn of this century, bringing their ideas from eastern Europe or Britain. These were tested against local conditions and adjusted to meet perceived needs.

Other ideas, fed into the socialist movement by persons with no political affiliation, get bare mention or are overlooked. It is precisely to some such people, living in Cape Town in the 1920s and 1930s, that this paper is directed: to Olive Schreiner (who died in December 1920) and her closest disciple, Ruth Schechter Alexander; and to the Cape Town academics of the 1920s and 1930s. There is a continuum before the Second World War that links these people: their criticism of racism, opposition to imperialism and war, defence of minority rights, and their rationalism and socialism. Then the thread was broken and new ideas were fed into the socialist movement by a new generation.

The early luminaries and their traditions were forgotten in the events that followed the war. Their names were expunged from memory, their achievements, both academic and social, seemingly ignored by a new generation of political activists. And for those who still remember names like Benjamin Farrington, classicist and writer on science in antiquity; Lancelot Hogben, zoologist and populariser of scientific advancement; Frederick Bodmer, linguist and lecturer in German, it is not generally known that they lived in South Africa, lectured in Cape

Town, and participated actively in the cultural and literary life of the town. In writing about them I am aware of the difficulties involved in determining the influence they exercised, both on the general public and on socialist organizations. Many of the people involved stayed for a short period in that intellectual milieu and then went their separate ways. They tended to be isolated in academic circles and had only peripheral contact with political bodies. Their ideas, even when heard at learned societies, did not always appear relevant to the struggles being conducted in the country and, even when they impinged directly on political groups, the extent of their influence defies measurement. Nonetheless the potential impact of such people requires serious research. Of these none are more important than Ruth Schechter Alexander, whose name cannot be found in any of the annals of socialist history, whose essays are long forgotten and whose organization of a literary salon seems to be unrecorded.

### *Ruth Schechter: A Family Background*

When Ruth Schechter married Morris Alexander in 1907 at the age of 19, and went with him to South Africa, it is said that friends asked in sympathy 'what will she do in that outlandish place'. To this her father replied: 'perhaps she will see Olive Schreiner'. Solomon Schechter had read Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (published in 1883) and, according to a lecture given by Ruth in 1929, had been deeply impressed by the thoughts expressed by the author. It is not known whether he had also heard of Olive's defence of the Jews in a letter to the Social Democratic Federation of Cape Town in February 1905, in which she attacked the Russian state for encouraging the pogroms in which hundreds of Jews were injured or killed, and thousands of lives disrupted. Nor is it known if he heard of Olive's defence of the right of Jews to be in South Africa when she referred with approbation to the recognition of Yiddish as an European language, in an address in 1906. Without this Jews would have been denied entry to South Africa. Yet this might have been a vital bridge to her meeting with Ruth, because it was largely because of Morris Alexander's intervention that this legislation was passed in the Cape and Olive would have known of the centrality of his actions.

Ruth left the family home (then in New York), went to Cape Town and did meet Olive Schreiner. Indeed, Olive was a visitor at her house, and Ruth became her close friend and admirer. As a bonus, Ruth's parents and siblings, who visited South Africa in 1910, also met and enjoyed the friendship of this great writer.

Ruth Alexander, as she was now known, was a person of decided opinion and not easily persuaded by others. However, there is no doubt that Olive Schreiner was her guiding light throughout her adult life. Ruth's course was set by what she learned from her friend and some of the apparent contradictions in her life can be understood through an unravelling of the relationship between these two women. Ruth's family heritage shaped her earlier values, and these remained with her

throughout her life. Then, at the end of Olive Schreiner's life, Ruth met the lecturers at the University of Cape Town and her continued association with these men, throughout her residence in South Africa, reinforced her decisions on the path she would take.

Born on 1 May 1888 in London, Ruth was the daughter of one of most famous Jewish scholars of his time, Dr Solomon Schechter. Educated at school in Cambridge and New York, Ruth did not go to university but acquired a more intensive and deeply rooted education from her mother, who had been a teacher of young ladies in Germany and was an accomplished linguist, who had translated Zangwill's books into German and, according to Farrington, as her father's unofficial secretary. Ruth had also met scholars, students, artists and leading intellectuals at home. It was there that she 'acquired the delight in impersonal conversation about things of the mind, in the absence of which she found all society insipid and dull'.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Schechter was Reader in Talmudic at Cambridge University and then President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In Cambridge his circle of acquaintances and friends were drawn from the intelligentsia, whether Jewish or English, religious or agnostic.<sup>2</sup> In 1896 he was informed by two Presbyterian women that they had acquired fragments of old documents in Cairo. He found one of them to be from the long lost Hebrew version of the Apocryphal Book of Ben Sira. Funded by the Master of St John's College, Charles Taylor, he travelled to Cairo. There he entered the depository of sacred texts (the *genizah*) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue at Fostat (Old Cairo). Almost completely sealed off from the outside world and entered through a small aperture, the *genizah* contained a mass of fragments of books and documents dating from the 10th century. Schechter requested and was given the documents, and had them transported to Cambridge.

Writing about the treasure, Schechter said in his *Studies in Judaism*:

One can hardly realise the confusion in a genuine, old *genizah* until one has seen it. It is a battlefield of books, and the literary production of many centuries had their share in the battle, and their *dissecta membra* are now strewn over an area. Some of the belligerents have perished outright and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, while others, as if overtaken by a general crush, are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps, which even with the aid of chemical appliances [in the 1890s] can no longer be separated without serious damage to their constituents...

In their present condition these lumps sometimes afford curiously suggestive combinations; as, for instance, when you find a piece of some rationalistic work, in which the very existence of either angels or devils is denied, clinging for its very life to an amulet in which these same beings (mainly the latter) are bound over to be on their good behaviour and not to interfere with Miss Jair's love for somebody. The development of the romance is obscured by the fact that the last lines of the amulet are mounted on some IOU or lease, and this in turn is squeezed between the sheets of an old moralist, who treats all atten-

tion to money affairs with scorn and indignation. Again, all these contradictory matters cleave tightly to some sheets from a very old Bible.

The genizah depository was accepted by the Senate of Cambridge University and housed at the library as the Taylor-Schechter collection. Schechter and his associates separated, cleaned and pressed, over 34,000 fragments of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic literature, letters and catalogues concerning relations with Muslims and Christians, plagues, police and prisons, warfare and welfare.<sup>3</sup>

Ruth was reared in an atmosphere in which these fragments lay at the centre of her father's work. She absorbed the climate generated by the interest in these ancient documents and was deeply devoted to her father. Ruth's parents shaped her values and attitudes, her religious fervour and interest in Zionism, and the intellectual background that carried her through life. It could not have been otherwise: the family was imbued with the sensibility and culture of nineteenth century Europe and with a keen awareness of world events.

When Ruth was 12 years old she met Morris Alexander, then 23 years old. He had won a scholarship to Cambridge in 1899 to read law<sup>4</sup> and became a close friend of the family. There was a romantic, if precocious, attachment and after Alexander's return to South Africa they corresponded. Alexander's ardour grew and Ruth had adolescent fantasies about this scholar from Cape Town who, after his return to South Africa, fought for the right of entry of Jewish immigrants into the Cape colony. Intended immigrants were required by Cape legislation to be proficient in a European language, but Yiddish, written in Hebrew characters, was designated as Semitic. In 1906 Alexander, working through the newly formed Cape Jewish Board of Deputies (of which he was president) succeeded in persuading the Parliament that the language be recognized as 'European'. It was this event that was celebrated in 1906, when Olive Schreiner's address was read.

In June 1907, with the top Jewish dignitaries of New York in attendance, Morris Alexander claimed his bride. On their honeymoon the couple stopped in at the Zionist Congress in Europe, and after five months absence Alexander and his bride returned to Cape Town. By all accounts, including the letters that Ruth wrote, the marriage was a happy one. At least during the first period.<sup>5</sup> Ruth was the devout and observant wife of a man who had a career open to him as an Advocate and in 1908 he started his long parliamentary career as a member of the Cape Legislative Assembly. He led the Jewish Board of Deputies in Cape Town and that gave Ruth a preeminent position in the Jewish community and (if she had desired it) in the social set that rotated around the legal fraternity, the ruling parliamentary party and government officials.

Morris Alexander was an early liberal in the South African parliament and gave his personal support to Indian leaders who organized the early opposition to discrimination. His house was always open to visiting Indians, commencing with Gandhi. There was a room in which they could stay, and a succession of Indian dignitaries found a place to stay in a town which was otherwise closed to them.

His one major act of parliamentary rebellion came in 1920 when he stood in the election as an independent, demonstrating a dislike of the party of General Smuts. He was successful and sat alone in the House until 1929 when he lost his seat. He opposed discrimination on grounds of race, creed or colour, although he was never in the forefront of those that took such a stand; but he was one of the few in Parliament who opposed the removal of the Cape African vote in 1935–36. He also supported the cause of women's suffrage although he did not extend this, as did Ruth, to the demand that all women be enfranchised. In 1937, after Ruth had left him, he renewed his fight to have Yiddish recognised as a European language for immigrants to South Africa

Without wishing to belittle Alexander, evidence suggests that he stood as an independent in 1921 at the insistence of his wife. Ruth was impatient with General Smuts and his ruling South African Party. On 27 May 1917 she received a letter from John X Merriman, a leading Cape parliamentarian who, at one stage, had been expected to become the first South African Prime Minister. Merriman spoke of his 'despair' at Smuts's speech five days previously at the Savoy Hotel in London. It had been delivered, he wrote, to persuade a 'gullible public' that coming legislation 'whose effect — I will not say whose intention — is to reduce the native to the status of a barbarian serf', is founded on the "Bed rock of Xtian principles". [This] is indeed an evil omen'.<sup>6</sup>

This letter undoubtedly affected Ruth because, except for letters she received from Olive Schreiner, this was one of the few she kept. After this Ruth would have little cause to believe that General Smuts would allow any betterment in the conditions of the black population. Three years later, Alexander balked at the absorption of the Unionist Party (to which he had belonged) by the South African Party (led by Smuts). At the next parliamentary elections, in early 1921, Alexander stood as an independent. While he made an urgent visit to his ill brother in London, Ruth managed his constituency business with the assistance of Olive Schreiner.

Alexander was returned unopposed and on his return home he received a letter on board ship from Ruth. In it she said that many people had congratulated him on his stand against the two major parties, but she warned that he would have requests from both Smuts and Nationalist candidates for assistance in the election. He 'had to decide before the boat docked where he stood'. She continued:

My dear, my dear, my big man, you stand at the parting of the ways. Within the next two weeks you must become either in very truth the leader of a new Party with malice towards none, with charity towards all, with courage ever to fight for right as God gives us to see the right, or to sink to an unrecognized appendage of this group or that. Little fear enough for you of that. But if it is to be the other way for you, the way that I swear is yours if you choose to tread its lofty, difficult path, my darling, it is you who may yet bring peace to this torn country. Then you must be very careful, very certain in these first steps along the road.<sup>7</sup>

It seems superfluous to comment in 1992 on the illusory base of Ruth's political aspirations in 1921, particularly as women were marginal to parliamentary politics at the time. It was even more fanciful for Ruth to see in Morris the saviour of South Africa. Yet Olive Schreiner's involvement in this parliamentary campaign is not surprising. The close bond between the two women would account for Olive's participation in the constituency rooms, and her recognition of Morris's fight for the right of the Jews to enter South Africa would have clinched the matter.

This seems to have been the last occasion in which Ruth participated actively in her husband's political activities. There is no indication that she willingly took any further part in the public activities of her husband, even when propriety indicated that she should be present at an official function. It is not known when and on what issue the break came, but taking into account new friendships and new ideas that were forming, it is possible that she was alienated by Morris Alexander's speech in Parliament in April 1923, after the brutal suppression of the general strike on the Rand, in which he declared that 'Judaism was the very antithesis of Bolshevism'. But this is to jump ahead of the story and there are some crucial facts to recount.

Ruth was a young woman, just over 30 years of age, with three growing children. Alongside her interests in politics and cultural affairs, she also had to manage the home and see to the rearing of her children. They obviously brought happiness — but also much grief. Solly, the youngest, brought most joy. He read science at Cape Town and medicine in Britain. Then, married and divorced in London, he was close to his mother. He married again in Britain and migrated to Australia where he had three sons and appears to have severed relations with his parents. However, the two girls were the cause of great anxiety and, seemingly left to the care of Ruth, absorbed a large part of her time and energies. The eldest, Esther, was put into a mental home when still young and remained under care throughout her life: she is said to be there still. The younger daughter, Muriel or 'Bobbet', was also unstable and spent many years in mental homes or under psychiatric treatment. But I know little of the family life. There is a paucity of information, punctuated by flashes of information in letters, but not enough to flesh out their lives. Enid Alexander, second wife of Morris, barely mentions the children or their upbringing in the biography of her husband, and does not allude to the difficulties faced by the family in the treatment of the two girls.

There were also wider family involvements. Ruth's relationship with the Alexander family does not appear to have been close, but her friendship with her cousin, Tzipporah Schechter Genussow (daughter of Israel, fraternal twin of Solomon) who came to South Africa in 1913 appears to have been warm. Menachem Genussow was a friend of Morris Alexander, and when the former took greetings from Solomon Schechter to his brother Israel in Palestine he met and married Tziporrah. The Genussows were prominent South African Zionists (although they get bare mention in the histories of South African Zionism) but left for Palestine between 1925 and 1931.<sup>8</sup> Then, at some stage in the early 1920s, Ruth



moved away from Jewish and Zionist circles and contact between the two sections of the family fell away, as did so much else in Ruth's life.<sup>9</sup>

Ruth's politics diverged from that of her husband, and this was one of the factors that led to tension in the family. However it is unlikely that this led to Ruth's departure from South Africa in December 1933 (as claimed by Enid Alexander) and their divorce in August 1935. Other persons had entered her life long before the final split and they all contributed to the path she chose. What is of note here, before exploring her involvement with these people, is the fact that whatever she did would have been known by members of her community. Ruth could not hide behind anonymity, nor would she have wanted to, however discretely she acted. In this respect the Jewish community had the final word. Ruth, once so prominent in the Cape, so celebrated as the daughter of the great Solomon Schechter and starring in her own right in literary circles, does not appear (as far as I can discover) in any of the annals of Jewish society outside the biography of Morris Alexander. She became a non-person by virtue of what she did, and in the time-honoured tradition of the Jewish community, she was cast out when she left South Africa to marry an Irish communist and become a propagandist for the British-Soviet Unity Committees. The metamorphosis of this remarkable person, and the reason for her ostracism, need explanation.

### *The Meeting with Olive Schreiner*

Ruth Alexander sailed for the Cape to the refrain that perhaps she would meet Olive Schreiner, the South African novelist who had stirred the imagination of the British intelligentsia. I have yet to find accounts of the welcome that must have greeted their arrival in Cape Town in 1907 but it is hard to believe that the event was not celebrated. Morris was a prominent citizen and the stories of her father's work would have drawn attention to Ruth.

Solomon Schechter's prescience proved correct. Ruth met Olive Schreiner shortly after she arrived at the Cape and a strong bond connected them.<sup>10</sup> The meetings and correspondence that followed their introduction to each other were a dominant factor in Ruth's life through to Schreiner's death in December 1920. This was a meeting of like minds in which the warmth and wisdom of the older woman met with the spontaneity and growing understanding of the younger. Ruth visited Olive, confided in her, and in those days conveyed the happiness that she had found in her domestic affairs. They were friends socially and in their strong convictions. The letters that were exchanged indicate the empathy between the two women. Ruth responded warmly to the growing friendship. Verse that Ruth wrote was sent to Olive for her pleasure and hopefully for approval.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore Ruth introduced interesting persons to Olive — one of whom was undoubtedly Benjamin Farrington, a young lecturer in Latin, who arrived at the University of Cape Town in March 1920.<sup>12</sup>

In June 1914, writing from Nauheim in Germany, Olive alluded to anti-semitic remarks in the hotel in which she was staying. In response, wrote Olive, Will [Schreiner] had said that the most gifted person they had met in Cape Town was a Jewess. And in a marginal note, Olive added, 'meaning you'. Olive said that she had been delighted that Will should have made that statement; and that Ruth's mother and sister could not have rejoiced as much as she at seeing other people appreciating her. If that was not sufficient praise, Olive added that Ruth was still going to develop, intellectually and in other ways.

In a decade of contact the discourse covered a wide range of common interest, with Olive Schreiner guiding her young disciple. They discussed their families (including Ruth's growing family) and wrote about the problems faced by Gandhi's disciples, and their campaigns against the discriminatory laws that affected the Indians of South Africa. They condemned the ubiquitous anti-semitism and racism; and took similar positions on the women's suffrage movement.

On these problems the two women were in close accord, but it was usually Schreiner who took the lead in defining attitudes. They held in common an ideal of individual human rights. They condemned notions of racial or ethnic superiority and they opposed the use of force in national conflicts. They upheld the rights of individuals to impartial justice and in their attitudes felt no need to appeal to the sanctions of church or a god; and it was undoubtedly Olive who first introduced Ruth to agnosticism. Ruth's ultimate rejection of religion could only have led to further strains in her relations with her husband and the local Jewish community.

The values shaped in the 13 years of their acquaintance became the touchstone of everything Ruth did after Olive's death — although it led to an adulation on Ruth's part that seems excessive and *gauche*. Nonetheless, the essays she wrote on Olive must be understood against the close relationship that existed between the two women. Writing in November 1959, Farrington said:

In the twenty-two years I knew Ruth she lived in the continual awareness of Olive Schreiner's personality. This awareness lay at the deepest levels of her thought and feeling, and above all, was present when hard decisions had to be made. Nor was it dependent on Olive's books, but on their friendship. This needs to be remembered in estimating the importance of anything Ruth has said about Olive.<sup>13</sup>

Partly out of devotion but also from conviction, Ruth lectured and wrote on Olive Schreiner, her writings and her ideals. The principles that they had agreed determined Ruth's path. One course of action in particular can be traced to Olive's strong conviction that the overthrow of the Russian Tsar was a great liberating event and that the new republic that took its place had to be supported. For Schreiner this position was taken after the terrible pogroms at the turn of the century. Her attitude was strengthened by friends in Europe who denounced Russia as the font of reaction in Europe.

In a letter written to Ruth on 22 August 1915 Olive Schreiner said: 'I am so glad Russia is being beaten. It may mean freedom for Russia but I fear England and



France will come to the autocracy's help again as they did after the Japanese war and crush down the movement for freedom. If only Finland would rise and just proclaim herself freed'. On 12 May 1920 she commented: 'I am so glad that the working men here refused to load the ship with guns to fight the Russian republic...Through all the dark and agony of this time I see far, far off a better and brighter day dawning'. But the remark that Ruth remembered and quoted, first in her talk on 'Olive Schreiner' in 1929, and then in her last published article (and repeated in the Commemoration service at her burial in 1942), harked back on a visit to Olive in 1920.

Ruth reports that answering an urgent message for her to come unusually early one day, Schreiner said on the phone that 'something beautiful has happened that has made me very happy'. When they met, Olive exclaimed: 'Haven't you seen the papers! Didn't you see that Denikin [the 'White Russian' General] is out of Russia. Don't you see what it means!' Then, said Ruth, 'for an hour, with flashing eyes and in full tones she told me what it did mean — the lifting of the blockade, the ability of the Russians to get hold again of food and medicine and machinery, and to begin to get their house in order'.<sup>14</sup>

Olive was desperately ill and did not have long to live. She thought, as did many others at the time, that in the events in Russia she had caught a glimpse of the future. This she communicated to Ruth in that impressionable meeting in late 1920. That is only part of what she transmitted to her young friend. Ruth referred to aspects of their conversations in some of her lectures and reviews, but much that was not unrecorded can only be surmised. After Olive's death Ruth protested in print against publications of her friends work by Cronwright, Olive's husband. Relatives and intimates of Olive wrote to congratulate Ruth at the time. They are testimony to the high regard in which Ruth was held by Olive's friends. The letters are deposited in the South African Library.

#### *Enter Benjamin Farrington*

Ruth's formal scholastic career had ended in secondary school but the atmosphere at home, which was saturated with ideas and achievement through study, and her work for her father, had given her an appetite for learning that she never lost. Sometime in 1918 (if not earlier)<sup>15</sup> she made contact with the University of Cape Town — but the nature of this contact remains obscure. On 14 December 1918, Olive commented in a letter: 'I am so glad you are working at the University. I'm sure its so wise'. Then in a letter of 1 April 1919 she wrote: 'I hope it goes well with your studies'. Whether Ruth started on a degree or on some research project is unknown — but she had obviously made friends among members of the staff. According to a taped interview with Benjamin Farrington, one of Ruth's first friends was J S Marais the historian, then in the classics department. Marais introduced Ruth to Gerard Paul Lestrade who had just completed a masterate in classics, prior to his

studying ethnology abroad.<sup>16</sup> Ruth was to say in 1932, in a letter to Farrington, that Lestrade was more than a little bit in love with her.

In March 1920 Benjamin Farrington arrived from Ireland to join the university staff with an impressive reputation as a student of English literature, Greek and Latin. He was appointed lecturer in Latin, became senior lecturer in 1922 and then professor of Latin. Soon after he arrived in Cape Town he was introduced by Lestrade to Ruth and was, thereafter, a constant visitor at the Alexander home. He had been an assistant, teaching classics at Queen's University, Belfast, over the past four years and had been witness to the repression of the Irish uprising. Although he did not come from the Catholic community, he had joined Sinn Fein. The letters he received in Cape Town from friends and relatives through 1920 were filled with stories of the British troops – including the notorious Black and Tans – of shootings, imprisonments, and political turmoil. It seemed almost inevitable that he should start and publish *The Republic* for South African Irish readers for two years. But radical as he was in Irish affairs, he knew little about South Africa. After visiting Johannesburg in the summer vacation of 1920 he wrote home in the usual naïve colonial style, justifying segregation, the pass laws, separate trams, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Contact with Ruth led to a fresh look at the social issues in South Africa and he followed her lead. In this, as in so many other instances, the thread stretched back from her father, through Olive Schreiner and into the intellectual life of inter-war South Africa.

The marriage of minds between Ben and Ruth started shortly after they met. The romance between these two must have started shortly thereafter. Letters to Ben from members of his family in Ireland in 1920 indicate that he had written about Ruth often and warmly. He was already 29 years old and on several occasions he was asked how his 'Jewess' was. In one letter in 1920, from a widow about to marry his uncle, he was asked whether his relationship was Platonic (which the good lady did not hold by), or whether he went further. Ben undoubtedly ignored the question. Whatever occurred was discreet and might even have been innocent over many years. Ruth was a married woman aged 32 years with three children and, initially, a religious Jewess. She was furthermore the wife of a man who was prominent in Parliament and a leader of the Jewish community. Indiscretion would have placed great stress on family ties and on propriety.

There were internal tensions in Ruth's life, only some of which can be surmised – and this partly from her unpublished novel, *The Exiles*, which has autobiographical overtones. Whatever her problems at home in New York, they were as nothing compared with her reactions against her husband's family, with whom she had little sympathy. The portrait of the family with whom her heroine stayed in Cape Town, allowing for dramatic licence, is that of the middle class society into which Ruth was cast when she arrived in Cape Town, and her caustic descriptions reflect some of her attitude to the family circle.

The contact with Olive Schreiner took her further from the small closed community of Cape Town and her discontents were fuelled through friendship with the

young lecturers at the university. It is clear from her novel that Ruth, without ever denying her Jewishness, discarded her religion. In this there can be little doubt that she was following in the footsteps of Olive. But she would also have been supported in this decision by her contact with Farrington and people like Clare Goodlatte (the former nun, turned Trotskyist), with whom she was in contact. In her new persona Ruth also became critical of at least some of the Indian representatives in South Africa — while continuing to defend the right of local Indians to citizenship — and was a fervent champion of the African and Coloured people. It is significant that her novel took as its theme a love affair between two new immigrants to South Africa. The woman is a Jewess (presumably Ruth herself), come to stay with guardians, with all the faults of the Jewish middle class immersed in the world of money and marriage brokering. The man is a young, and obviously brilliant, lecturer who discovers after he starts teaching at the University that his mother, who had died at child birth, was Coloured. The scenes in the novel are set in the home of the heroine's guardians and in the District Six, which Ruth knew well.<sup>18</sup>

Ruth included a description of District Six in 1933 in the book she started on the Coloured people. This region, situated adjacent to Cape Town's main shopping precinct, was home to a large proportion of Cape Town's coloured people. It was a mixed area with a warren of overcrowded houses that had decayed into one large slum. This was the home of Cape Town's coloured workers, its gangsters and, at its periphery, some of the more affluent Coloured citizens. Many years after Ruth left South Africa the district was cleared of its coloured population in the name of apartheid and its houses bulldozed. White families were supposed to move into this 'reclaimed' suburb but popular protest prevented that happening. District Six was reduced to a derelict field in one of the prime regions of the town.

In Ruth's novel the hero and heroine visit District Six and confront the awful reality of the colour bar. Accompanied by his companion, the hero enters its portals as a person reclaiming his Coloured family. There he experiences all the tension that accompanies this crossing of the colour line. The awkwardness that comes with ignorance, class difference and living style are caught by Ruth in a set of cameos which demonstrates her knowledge of the situation.

The story in the novel revolves around, and is resolved by, the hero's forced resignation as a lecturer. This is the consequence of an invitation from the hero to two relatives who are among the earliest Coloured students admitted to the university, to a dance on the campus. The race issue leads to a fight at the dance, and the hero's defiant disclosure of his origin. His lectures are subsequently boycotted, and his room apple-carted, by intolerant students. The heroine is also disowned by her guardians and this completes her freedom from the Jewish community.

Unable to persuade the local magistrate to marry them, they leave the country together, and long since lovers — although the novel has a time span of only five months — claim married status to get a joint berth on the ship they board. In the introduction to the book Ruth states that all the characters are imaginary, but that some of the events are not. The university dance, which provided the story's

catharsis, was indeed real and the events were predictable. Professor Lancelot Hogben, head of the Zoology department at the University, provides an account of what happened, in his unpublished autobiography. A young Canadian lecturer in Hogben's department fell in love with a well known Coloured woman and invited her and her cousin to the University's annual dance. Informed of this intended contravention of campus custom, and aware of the possible reactions, Hogben and his wife Enid took the group to the dance under their wing. Hogben says that the two were Coloured doctors, both Glasgow graduates, but it is more likely to have been Dr Aswardah Abdurhaman and Cissie Gool (much renowned for her beauty), scions of the most prominent Coloured family of the time.

The reaction was as expected although Hogben saw to it that nothing happened at the dance. At a meeting on the campus summoned to protest against this 'outrage', one rabble-rousing student accused Hogben of having brought an African prostitute to the dance and departing in a state of intoxication. Hogben consulted 'the husband of Ruth Alexander' (as he put it) and, on Alexander's advice, threatened an action for slander against the Student Representative Council. The students capitulated and, at a specially convened meeting, read a public apology, written by Hogben. This, said Hogben with obvious relish, laid stress on the need for racial coexistence.<sup>19</sup>

Those events were still to come when Ruth met Benjamin Farrington. It was this meeting that resolved the many problems faced by Ruth in Cape Town. As the relationship developed, Ruth threw over the bonds of a marriage that had palled, escaped the embrace of a community (and its religion) that had lost its significance for her, and condemn the fetters of segregation that divided the society. Liberation from the orthodox establishment, which Olive Schreiner had sought in her humanistic writing, was translated into reality by Ruth when she broke the icons surrounding her. Had she succeeded in capturing this artistically in her novel, she would have created a significant work. But her didactic intent stifled her creative potential. The novel never came to life, her characters were one-dimensional and never developed as persons, and her rich insights failed to take flight.

In her relationship with Farrington, in which her creativity came to life, she regained the intellectual stimulus that she had enjoyed with her father and then with Olive Schreiner. Ben Farrington inspired all who heard him with his enthusiasm for the Greek and Latin classics and English literature, as also a passionate concern for Irish freedom. He had acquired from Sinn Fein a radicalism and this was transformed over the years into a left-wing internationalism. But the friendship was not a one-sided affair. Ruth had much to contribute and it is obvious that Ben was engulfed in her enthusiasms. Ruth had a deep feel for the people of South Africa, a knowledge of the problems faced by black communities inside a repressive society and a passionate love of freedom and justice. She was also deeply involved in the literary circles in Cape Town and, being proficient in six languages (German, French, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English), was widely read. She was in demand as a lecturer on contemporary writings and started a salon at

her home for painters and sculptors, poets and novelists. This brought Ruth and Ben into contact with the Cape Town artists, the budding writers, and those interested in literature. It also provided Ruth with a platform, because she was much in demand in literary circles as a lecturer on contemporary writers in Europe.

Working separately, but undoubtedly discussing their ideas, Ben and Ruth enjoyed over a decade of fruitful writing and lecturing in Cape Town. Ben published a number of texts for his courses at the University and prepared the work which he began to publish towards the end of the 1920s. Ruth embarked on book reviews for the local press, for the *New York Nation* and for the *South African Nation*. There is no catalogue of the pieces she published, sometimes weekly, and no notes on the many seminar and lecture course she prepared. Among the papers and cuttings I found in the Lewin papers and elsewhere, are her writings and many of her reviews of the works, published posthumously, of Olive Schreiner. Starting in December 1922, on the second anniversary of Olive's death, there is a handwritten lament at the death of 'so rich a personality, so inexhaustible a courage, so beautiful an honesty, so noble a scorn of baseness, so all compassionate a love...' This was to be the base-line for all Ruth's subsequent reviews.

In February 1923 she wrote a critical review of Olive Schreiner's *Stories, Dreams, and Allegories*, for the *Cape Times* published by S C Cronwright-Schreiner, Olive's widower. While Ruth welcomed the appearance of the book she disapproved of the production of Olive's immature writing for public circulation. Some of the pieces, she protested, could not 'add lustre to the fame of its author'. Ruth was also less than happy in her review on 23 July, in the *Cape Times*, of Cronwright's publication of Olive's *Thoughts on South Africa*. Most of the chapters, she said, had been written and published in 1890-92 and its chapters revised by Olive for separate publication in Cape or English papers in 1902. But chapter 8 of the new volume, which was reproduced from an incomplete typescript, contained material which contradicted many of the contentions in the rest of the book. Nonetheless, once again Ruth greeted the publication of a book which made available the thoughts of Olive Schreiner for the general public.

Ruth was already suspicious of, and more than a little angry, at Cronwright, claiming that he erred in what he published and was dishonest in his choice of material written by Olive. Ruth was outraged in 1924 when she read his *Life of Olive Schreiner*, and then his edited collection of her letters. In two devastating articles, first in *The South African Nation* of 9 August 1924, on the *Life*, and then in the *Cape Times* (on the letters) she contrasted her appraisal of Olive — repeating the phrases used in her essay of 1922 — with the meanness and dishonesty she detected in Cronwright's writings and selections. Ruth answered and dismissed his assertions of Olive's 'childishness', 'dishonesty', 'inconsiderateness', and so on, to show him at best as an ill-informed writer, and at worst, as having provided a 'caricature of a great personality': a violator 'of the privacy of the dead'.

These reviews drew a warm response from members of the Schreiner family and several of Olive's friends. They wrote, complimenting Ruth for having had the



courage to rebuke Cronwright publicly, and urged her to assist in the publication of essays on Olive and to publish a more representative collection of her letters. This was Ruth's intention and she started collecting material for such a book. But Ruth had underestimated Cronwright's determination to stop any other publication of Olive's works and, despite legal opinion from Morris Alexander that he had no legal right to prevent Ruth proceeding, the opposition acted as a deterrent. In like fashion Cronwright insisted on reading the script of her lecture on Olive Schreiner in 1929 before it was delivered. Although Ruth insisted that she would allow no censorship, she was obliged to allow him a pre-view before delivering her address. Cronwright's control of the copyright of his wife's writings probably delayed (and finally inhibited) Ruth in her desire to write her book.

Whether Ruth would have written the book on Olive must remain a matter of speculation. The talk she gave in 1929 was expanded and printed in five instalments in the *Cape Times* the following year. She intended printing it as a monograph but that too was put aside. Ultimately, in 1942, just before her death, Ruth wrote one last article on Olive entitled 'A Very Great Woman'. It was printed in Britain in the journal *University Forward*, in March 1942, alongside other articles written by members or sympathizers of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

A survey of the articles she wrote, including her article comparing Olive to the Brontes, her review of *From Man to Man*, and her major essay on Olive Schreiner in 1929, requires more space than I have available. There is also one important issue that needs examination at this point. Partly under Olive's influence she was devoted to the twin demand for women's suffrage and the breaking of racial barriers. It was this that led her, in 1931, to follow Olive's example and break with the suffragette movement.

At some time, presumably before Union in 1910, Olive sent Ruth a leaflet setting out the aims of the Women's Enfranchisement League of the Cape Colony when launched in 1908. Its object, it said, was to promote an interest in the enfranchisement of women in the Cape Colony 'and advocate the granting of the vote to the women on the same terms as men'. Underlining this last sentence, Olive wrote across the leaflet her reason for leaving the League:

It was not a personal matter that made me leave the society. The women of the Cape Colony all women of the Cape Colony. These were the terms on which I joined.

Ruth stayed in the League but adopted Olive's policy. When, in early 1930, an Act was tabled granting only white women the vote Ruth rallied support to oppose the new colour bar. In a letter to the *Cape Times* on 5 March 1930, together with Caroline Murray, Anna Purcell, F H Schreiner, Lyndall Gregg and Rose Movsovic, all former members of the League committee, Ruth registered her protest against the proposed Women's Enfranchisement Bill. Giving the vote to white women, they said, would alter the whole franchise basis of the Cape.<sup>20</sup>

It was over this issue that the tensions between Ruth and Morris Alexander became uncontainable. After the Bill was passed all white women had to register on

the electoral roll. Ruth protested but, being told by her husband that she was required by law to do so, she signed under protest. She said that if made to do so she would leave the country, but that was only a small, if precipitating factor. The marriage had broken down irretrievably and this was a convenient time to leave a country in which she felt so alienated.

In telling the story of Ruth I have had little time to dwell on her growing relationship with Ben Farrington. Perhaps that is as it should be. The affair was discrete — although Morris undoubtedly knew what was happening — and many tongues were wagging. Ben and Ruth avoided activities that would have offended sectors of the Jewish or university circles. They also had to protect the children, or at least Solly, and Ruth maintained that she would not leave the home until he had completed his university education.

The tensions inside the family were only part of the story. There was also much extra-mural discussions of racism in campus circles and presumably either Ben, or both Ben and Ruth, became involved. The persons concerned, and even the nature of their politics is not always clear. Among the names that stand out are those of Farrington, Lancelot Hogben and Frederick Bodmer. Associated with them at some time were J G Taylor (psychology department) and Dora Taylor (who wrote a four-part article on Olive Schreiner in *Trek*, in 1942, and *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, in the 1950s) and also, at various times, Jean van der Poel (history), Helene and Jacques Malan (editor of *Trek*), David Schreer (lawyer and businessman), George Sachs (co-founder of the pro-Moscow *Guardian*), Paul Kosten (owner of Modern Books and on the editorial board of *Spark*) and others. Some of them contributed articles to the *Critic*, the University journal, and some (like Bodmer and Schreer) belonged to the Lenin, or later, the Spartacus Club. Schreer suggested that the *Communist Manifesto* be translated into Afrikaans in 1937–38. It is not certain who did the bulk of the translation but it was with the assistance of the Malans and Jean v d Poel. The *Manifesto* appeared in 1938 with an introduction by Trotsky, celebrating the 90th anniversary of its first publication.

Hogben's three years at the university from 1927–30, as Professor of Zoology, had a galvanising effect on the radical members of the university staff. He transformed his own department by using local fauna for demonstration and experimentation. One of his outstanding discoveries was the 'Hogben pregnancy diagnosis test' using the Cape clawed toad *Xenopus laevis*. Hogben and his wife Enid were visitors at Ruth's salon, and following their practice in Britain, kept open house on Saturday nights. Senior students, junior staff members and 'many of the Cape Town intelligentsia outside the University' were invited. The conversation, when political, was openly anti-segregationist. The Hogbens were outspoken on the race issue and friendly with Eddie Roux, who appealed to them to rescue two African leaders, hiding from a lynch gang in Worcester. Enid, together with Roux and Johnny Gomaz, both of the SACP, brought them back to Cape Town.<sup>21</sup>

The Hogbens did not stay. They felt that the country was becoming increasingly oppressive and left, Lancelot Hogben taking a position at the London School of

Economics. His list of publications was wide and included a number of texts that had wide public distribution. These included *Mathematics for the Millions* and *Science for the Citizen*. In 1937 he wrote a 'Preface on Prejudice' as an introduction to *Half Caste* by Cedric Dover condemning the South African 'Pigmentocracy' and complaining of an inability to conduct a consequential conversation (his 'favourite sport') because all attempted dialogues with South African graduates ended with the question: 'What would you do if a black man raped your sister?'

Hogben was not involved in any active political movement, nor were Ben and Ruth, although Farrington did deliver at least one lecture to the Lenin Club. Bodmer was for a short period chairperson of the Spartacus Club, but most academics in this circle stayed away from formal political groups, although they met with people in the Communist or the Workers Party personally. In two letters to Farrington in 1932 Ruth mentioned that she was seeing Clare Goodlatte, the former nun who was to become the editor of *Spark*, the Workers Party's paper.<sup>22</sup>

Academics are not rooted in one country. Hogben, Farrington and others left South Africa to take up posts elsewhere. Bodmer applied for the chair of German in Cape Town but, when it was given to a right winger, or 'truculent nazi' (to quote Hogben), he left the country and under Hogben's editorship, wrote *Loom of Language*. Farrington returned to Britain first as lecturer in Bristol and then as professor of Classics at the University of Wales in Swansea. There was nothing to keep Ruth in South Africa: she went first to New York where she stayed for approximately one year, before departing for Britain. After her divorce she married Farrington.

Ruth joined the Communist Party in Britain. This was the logical outcome of her growing despair of anything ever happening through parliamentary processes in South Africa. She had moved away from the parochial affairs in which Morris Alexander thrived. What concerned her thereafter was the increasingly difficult situation in South Africa — the extension of the oppressive colour bar, the whittling away of any protection from those laws. At the same time there were the fears in the early 1930s of fascism as it grew to become a world-wide phenomenon.

There was also a family connection that undoubtedly affected Ruth. Her younger sister Amy was a prominent party activist in the US Communist Party and wrote in its journal *New Masses*. The actual factors that led Ruth to her new position are unclear: what remains a mystery is her failure to take heed of the warnings from the left-oppositionists in Cape Town with whom she had been in contact. They spoke of the evils of forced collectivization, condemned the purges and expulsions of one-time Bolshevik leaders and cast doubt on the claims of the communists in South Africa. However, according to Farrington, Ruth was finally persuaded when she read the 'Stalin constitution' of 1936. (Farrington's phrase) This document which persuaded (or fooled) so many people outside the USSR proclaimed the full equality of women and men, of races and nationalities, 'in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life...' Ben, who also accepted the truth of the document and joined the Communist Party, quoted Ar-

ticles 122 and 123 in full in the Commemoration Service. This, he said, was taken by Ruth 'to be an epoch-making event'.<sup>23</sup>

In Swansea Ruth worked in the Workers Educational Association, the National Council of Labour Colleges, the Left Book Club, the National Council of Civil Liberties, the Women's Co-operative Guilds, and the British-Soviet Unity Committee. She believed that the struggle in Spain would start the transformation of all Europe. If she heard any critical comments on what was happening, she stopped her ears. Accepting Communist Party propaganda, Ruth turned to the crude literature that was emerging from party functionaries. In her interpretation of and lectures on English literature, to WEA and similar groups, she betrayed her own past by turning to the proponents of proletarian literature. In this she participated in the glorification of the USSR and the Third International which was so much the fashion of the intellectuals who had 'seen the light'.

The factors that turned people like Ruth to an uncritical adulation of Stalinism are explicable in terms of the crisis of the 1930s, superimposed on the social problems they were unable to address in their own societies. They saw no hope outside the Soviet Union and in walking through the morass of European politics this represented for them the one gleam of sanity. They accepted the lies coming out of Moscow uncritically and wandered into a wasteland, thinking they had found salvation for society. In that lies a tragedy that affected tens of thousands of people. Their aims and activities, however devoted, concealed the barbarism of the Stalin regime and added to the glorification of the USSR that destroyed the very revolution they sought. In so doing they betrayed themselves and helped betray the aspirations of a generation of socialists. The effect was disastrous and we have yet to recover from that loss of perspective. Ben continued in the Communist Party after Ruth's death, leaving it only after the Hungarian uprising was suppressed in 1956. He died in 1974.

In her role as propagandist Ruth turned the truth upside down. In the last article she wrote, Ruth turned again to Olive Schreiner, her friend and mentor. Written in support of the war, she once again quoted the passage on Denikin, but this time added an addendum. Schreiner, she said, had been a fighting socialist all her life. She had admired Lenin 'as incomparably the only great man the situation has produced, and as a man of outstanding genius', but she had not understood the 'full implications of Marxism', consequently 'ever and again she comes to vague or unclear conclusions, lessening the force and appeal of her writings for this generation'. In these few words Ruth devalued both her own work and that of Olive Schreiner. That great novelist might not have read much (if any) of Marx, she might not have understood any of his implications, but she never, never, indulged in such absurd preaching.

Ruth Schechter Farrington (as she was in the last years of her life) erred grievously. Throughout her life she had despised injustice and oppression and sought a way to oppose those who inflicted misery on others. The tragedy of the time lies in the way she, and so many like her, gave their support to the greatest

tyranny of the twentieth century: the regime that reigned in Moscow. In reading the Soviet constitution uncritically she accepted the worst confidence trick ever played on persons of good faith. In this Ruth exemplified the surrender of the western intellectuals of the 1930s to a tyranny that surpassed all others in the 20th century. She had turned the teachings of Olive Schreiner upside-down and also lost sight of the words of Abraham Lincoln, so proudly proclaimed in her letter to Morris Alexander in 1920 (as quoted above). The new system she had come to admire had *malice* towards all; with *charity* for none.

### Source Material:

#### Julius Lewin papers:

Obituary to Ruth (memorial service), 5 March 1942; Articles on Cairo genizah (*Jewish Chronicle* and others); Book reviews in *Cape Times*; Book review in *South African Nation*; Printed lecture on Olive Schreiner, *Cape Times*, 1930; Two letters from Farrington; Obituary to Farrington (*Times*, 21 November 1974).

#### South African Library:

Letters from Olive Schreiner to Ruth and other letters relating to possible publication of letters; Correspondence with Cronwright; Lecture on Olive (typescript and *Cape Times*); Several articles on Olive Schreiner; Letters from Farrington to Lily Guinsberg; *University Forward*, March 1942.

#### University of Cape Town:

Letters from Ruth to Morris Alexander, 1913; Extracts from H M Robertson, 'The University of Cape Town, 1918-68', typescript.

#### Farrington's Papers in the possession of Jane Straker.

Photographs of Ruth and of Farrington; Unpublished novel *The Exiles* c1936; *Cape Coloured: A Bye-Product of Empire*, c1938. Fourteen pages devoted to a description of District Six, typescript (21 pages); Letters to Ben from friends and relatives, mainly 1920/21, and from Ruth in 1932; Typescript (3 pages) by Farrington meant to introduce the publication of three essays by Ruth.

#### Hogben's Papers

'An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben, Ed by Adrian and Anne Hogben, Typescript, 1989; *Lancelot Thomas Hogben 1895-1975*, by G P Wells (Bibliographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society, Vol 24, November 1978); Preface on Prejudice in Cedric Dover, *Half Caste*, Secker & Warburg, 1937.

#### Other Papers/Books

Letters to the author from Raphael Levy.  
 Extracts from lecture by Stefan Reif on Solomon Schechter.  
 Two letters by Ruth to Raphael Levy.  
 Eddie and Win Roux, *Rebel Pity*, Penguin, 1972.  
 Enid Alexander, *Morris Alexander: A Biography*, Juta, 1953.



Gus Saron, *Morris Alexander: Parliamentarian and Jewish Leader*, South African Jewish Board of Deputies, 1966.

### A note on the origin of this paper.

Although I had known of the socialist current at UCT, represented by Farrington, Bodmer and Hogben among others, I first heard of Ruth Schechter Alexander when given Julius Lewin's papers for dispatch to Johannesburg in July 1991. The two files I found on Ruth were interesting but did not seem to fit into my programme of research. A series of subsequent events gave me a personal interest in pursuing this topic and it was only then that the significance of the subject became obvious.

A month after I saw the Lewin papers I visited Nechama Genussow in Kibbutz Nir David whom I had last seen in Johannesburg in 1941. From a two page printed article on the Genussow family I discovered that Nechama's grandfather was Israel Schechter, Solomon's twin brother. I visited South Africa shortly afterwards and found a copy of Vera Buchanan-Gould's biography of Olive Schreiner, *Not Without Honour*, written in 1949. It had reference to Ruth's projected publication of Olive Schreiner's letters. I read Ruth's letters of 1913 to her husband in the Alexander papers at UCT, but only on return to London found that Ruth's papers were in the South African Library. I obtained copies and these included Olive's letters to Ruth and correspondence about Olive Schreiner's letters.

Seeking old journals I contacted the Jewish Historical Society in London and was informed that the Presidential address by Dr Stefan Reif in October had been on Solomon Schechter. It was through Dr Reif that I obtained the address of Raphael Levy, the son of Ruth's cousin, whom she had seen in the US in 1933-34. Thereafter I found the addresses of Jane Straker, Farrington's daughter by his second wife, Barbara Sell.; of Dr Adrian Hogben; and the family of Solly Alexander in Australia.

In the search for documents I am indebted to the South African Library and the library at UCT, Eleanor Hawarden, Stefan Reif, Raphael Levy, Tikvah Alper, Jane Straker, Adrian and Anne Hogben, Hannah Kantor, Elsie Alexander and many others who have been so co-operative and willing to assist me.

Much more remains to be discovered and this essay must be considered as work in progress.

### References

1. Memorial service, thought to be written by Benjamin Farrington. I have added information about the family received from Raphael Levy, in a letter dated 25 June 1992.
2. According to Farrington's note, these included the novelist Israel Zangwill and J G Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*. Farrington papers.
3. Quotations and descriptions from Meir Persoff 'Hidden Treasures of Cairo', *Jewish Chronicle Magazine*, London, 25 November 1977. In his letter of 25 June 1992, Raphael Levy notes that Judeo-Arabic was Arabic written in Hebrew characters, the *lingua franca* of Jews living in the Moslem world from the 10th through the 13th centuries. The Hebrew literature was largely sacred, or religious literature.
4. See the biography of Morris Alexander by Enid Alexander.
5. The letters written when returning from a visit abroad in 1913 are those of a devoted wife.
6. Smuts was reported as saying: 'in all our dealings with the natives we must build on...the granite bedrock of the Christian moral code. Honesty, fair-play, justice, and the ordinary Christian virtues must be the basis of all our relations with the natives'.
7. Quoted by Enid Alexander. I did not find the letters from which she quotes in the Alexander papers. I am indebted to Raphael Levy for pointing out that Ruth was quoting from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address as President on 4 March 1865. With the ebd of the American Civil War in sight he said: 'With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who

- shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations'.
8. Ruth mentioned the marriage in a letter to Morris Alexander in 1913 and said that she hoped they would live nearby so that they could meet. Mr Genussow delayed his emigration to tide over his business interests during the depression.
  9. Nechama Genussow, 'The Genussow Family Achievement', an extract printed in *Telfed*, 1990.
  10. The date is not certain. Farrington states that Schreiner heard Ruth speak at a meeting and was immediately attracted to her, probably in 1907. Ruth in her lecture in 1929 (see below) says that Olive came to see her in 1910 for the first time but does not explain the circumstances.
  11. One poem, shown to Sonia [Havelock] Ellis, was highly praised by her for its Yeatsian flavour.
  12. In September 1920, Schreiner wrote to Ruth: 'What was the name of the young man I met at your house. He seemed such a delightful person. A young person was talking about him here. Says he is so remarkable. The students seemed impressed by him yesterday'. Farrington states that he met Olive Schreiner twice. Farrington's papers.
  13. Farrington, to Lily Guinsberg in Muizenberg. Letter in South African Library.
  14. The *Cape Times*, 10 August 1929, commented on the lecture given to the Cape Town branch of the English Association. It printed a version in five instalments between 26 April-2 May 1930 which was considerably longer than the typescript for the lecture. The passage on Denikin was repeated by Ruth in 'A Very Great Woman', *University Forward*, March 1942.
  15. It was only in 1916 that the University of Cape Town became an independent body and teaching commenced on the new campus at Rondebosch.
  16. Lestrade achieved prominence in his field as an ethnologist. He is said to have mastered 34 languages and Farrington referred to his skill in mastering the African languages and recording their sounds phonetically.
  17. Few of the letters to Farrington discuss the contents of his letters home. However, one correspondent, 'Q', writing on 16 August 1920, took Ben to task for having come to these conclusions.
  18. Ruth started and ran the Castle Coloured Play Centre in District Six financed, according to Enid Alexander, by her husband. See her typescript: *Cape Coloured: A Bye-Product of Empire*.
  19. 'An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben'. Ike Horvich, one-time chair of the CPSA, thought that the two persons I name were the one's concerned.
  20. The correspondence, and the legal opinion she obtained from her husband, is in the Ruth Alexander file (Olive Schreiner collection) at the South African Library.
  21. The letter is reprinted in Enid Alexander, p 146.
  22. Biographical details are from 'An Unauthorized Autobiography of Lancelot Hogben'.
  23. See my article on Clare Goodlatte in *Searchlight South Africa*, No 2.
  24. Commemoration Service to Ruth.

## Document

# CAPE COLOURED: A BYE-PRODUCT OF EMPIRE

R S Farrington

[Dedicated to My Friends in District Six]

[This book which was started, but did not get beyond 21 typed pages, provides an aspect of Ruth Farrington's thinking in the late 1930s. We reprint the introduction.]

In July 1934 the Union of South Africa appointed a Commission of Enquiry into 'the position in the country's economic and social structure of the Cape Coloured population (including Cape Malays) in the various part of the

Union'. The Commission contained three names that might roughly be labelled Dutch, two British, and one Malay. This one 'non-European', to use the customary South Africanism for a person other than white, Dr Abdurahman, is an outstanding if not altogether impressive figure among the Cape Coloured people. He is an able doctor, and has for thirty years or thereabouts been a member of the Cape Municipal Council and also a member of the Cape Provincial Council. If the Act of Union had not debarred all non-Europeans from Parliament he would certainly have had a seat there for nearly as long. Throughout his long career he has always consistently supported that party which was the strongest in the Cape Province. The other members of the Commission are all white South Africans of the professional class, with a reputation for either mildly liberal or mildly humanitarian ideas about the non-European section of the population. Nevertheless the six were divided into two, sometimes into three, opinions. At the end of their detailed and lengthy proceedings — the Report was submitted to the Governor-General in August 1937 — one conviction and only one united them, though it is one to which they have not in so many words set their names. That is that the position of the Coloured People is hopeless, and that there is no help for it, though minor alleviations may be possible.

It is hopeless, since in the interests of the country as a whole, a phrase which in South Africa means the interests of the whites, the development of the odd half million Cape Coloured cannot proceed along natural lines, either culturally or economically. That, of course, and for the same reasons, is also true of the far larger Native population. But as a whole the Natives have not yet proceeded far enough along the one-way street prescribed for them by their white rulers to beat their heads against the stones of the prison walls in which it ends. Nor, heavy though their grievances are and intolerable the restrictions under which they live, are the whites of South Africa guilty against the Natives to the same extent, since they are not their own creation. The Cape coloured people, betrayed in their beginnings, betrayed again at the time of Union, and yet again when the franchise was standardised for the whole Union in 1931 [when white women were enfranchised], are a bye-product of Empire. The story of their production in the days of the flourishing slave-trade, and of their utterly callous scrapping in the present era, in South Africa, of unlimited cheap wage-slave labour, is as ugly a bit of Imperial history as any, and one to which I will return later.

In the Cape Province, however, where for various social and historic reasons a section of the whites have an uneasy conscience about the Coloured people, it is still permissible to desire their betterment in so far as it in no way impinges upon the prosperity and wellbeing of the whites, and to deplore their present miseries. It should be noted, also, that here the Coloured men still retain their votes, and with them, in one or two constituencies, a modicum of political power. It is to this uneasy conscience, doubtless, that they owe the recent Commission, and the feeling is specially clear in the general Conclusions of the Report.

In the section, for instance, headed 'Social Discontent' in the chapter devoted to 'Special Social Problems', we find the following:

While there is very often profound discontent...among a large part of the Cape Coloured with the position of inferiority they occupy in the social and economic structure of South Africa, this discontent has, up to the present, not tended to take an active aggressive form. This discontent inclines rather to be coloured by a more or less fatalistic acquiescence in a situation in which they feel unable to make any essential change. Many feel that factors, over which they have little or no control, effectively prevent the Coloured man from successfully making his way in the world in which he moves. It is inevitable that this conviction should exert an often paralysing influence on ambition and enterprise. The view was, indeed, more than once expressed to the Commission, that, so far from progress, at least in the economic sphere, having taken place in, say, the last fifteen or twenty years, there has been retrogression. The lack of hope of bringing about improvement by their own efforts naturally contributes to the development of those traits of untrustworthiness and lack of industry and of interest in their work, which Europeans are prone to condemn in this class of Cape Coloured.

The contrast between the sombre picture of despair and stagnation given in these few sentences and the smug wholesale condemnation of 'this class of Cape Coloured', declared at the beginning of the paragraph to be 'a large part of the Cape Coloured', expressed in the last equivocal sentence, is very characteristic of the Report. [In a sentence that is partly scored out, Ruth Farrington said that in the [Report's] Addendum, signed by Messrs Abdurahman, Buchanan and Fowler, the commissioners said that the 'complexity' of the problem was rendered more difficult by the need for 'reconciling or co-ordinating the divergent views of witnesses - and they might reasonably have added, of the members of the Commission - and they then stated]:

...We would emphasise the fact that the majority of the Coloured population are insufficiently educated to set out with anything approaching precision the conditions under which they live and to describe with any degree of clarity their real aspirations...the condition under which the masses of the Coloured people have to live is so abject that they have become imbued with a feeling, having its roots in that resignation which springs from despair, that these conditions cannot or will not be improved, and that as a consequence the retention of the goodwill of their employers is greatly to be preferred to the futility and displeasure which in their minds might at once attend upon the free and open expression of their grievances.

The picture is sufficiently terrible. But even as to the gently subduing cost of whitewash with which the pious recommendations and still more pious hopes of the Report are intended to screen from themselves the inherent crazy rottenness of the social structure of the society in which such a state of things is possible, there is no agreement within the Commission. Half of them, the 'Dutch' half, base their

projects for amelioration upon a policy of segregation; the others repudiate it, and ask for 'equality of opportunity in the industrial, commercial, professional and political life of the country', but disclaim any desire for 'social equality'. It is perhaps the measure of the present humiliation of the Coloured people as a whole that their municipal and provincial representative, one of themselves, should dare to sign his name to such a pronouncement, which if it means anything means the death-sentence of his people.

Now it happens that I lived for over a quarter of a century in or near Cape Town, and that during practically the whole of that period I was in touch with the Coloured people, had friends among them, and was engaged in work of one kind or another in connection with them. I saw much of the misery and of the inarticulate despair and apathy mentioned in the Report. I saw other things also, not mentioned there, closely connected with these. I saw the exploitation by the respectable prosperous whites of the Coloured population, that is, of the proletariat. It was an exploitation, not more culpable, but more shameless, than that in towns where employer and employed are of the same colour. It was made possible by a public opinion based on the conviction that the dark-skinned people who formed half the population of the city were of a different order of human beings, a conviction which underlies not merely every piece of repressive legislation framed against them and the whole body of social discrimination exercised against them, but also the tone and the recommendations of this elaborate and seemingly humane Inquiry into their conditions. I saw further the unbelievable goodness to each other which, as with the submerged and forgotten everywhere, exists and recreates itself without external stimulus or example. I saw intelligence, beauty, responsiveness, charm, initiative, flowering out of bitter poverty, often out of squalor, sometimes withering away as the grim years destroyed the resilience and hopefulness of childhood, sometimes surviving into adult lives of courage and performance. I saw in short that here was a proletariat and a tiny emergent middle class, which, in numbers equal roughly to the white population which lives upon its labour, and outlawed by that white population from all share in the amenities, and from all but a fraction of all educational, cultural, social facilities of the place, yet displayed within itself unmistakably every possibility for human development, and many a hint, notably in musical ability, of special gifts as a people. And I saw also that it stood at the crossroads: that within the next generation it must either begin to succumb to the destructive pressure of the whites, and sink, as since Union it has become increasingly plain the whites would have it, into a centre of untouchable hewers of wood and drawers of water forever, or they must enter upon a struggle for their rights and for their future of an altogether new kind. The vulture-shadow of Fascism overhangs South Africa in all men's sight; once it descends the night, any possible struggle will, unless it is by then already planned and organised, be reduced to a wild and futile scramble for the few poor crumbs of privilege as against the Natives, with which at present the Coloured are too often hushed and beguiled like a child with a stale sugar-stick. And in this struggle they



should have, and they will need, the informed sympathy and co-operation of all anti-fascists within the British Empire.

It is the purpose of this book to give to non-South African readers some account of the Cape Coloured people, of their past, their present, and finally of that determined change of purpose and of action on their part which, as I believe, alone can ensure for them a future.

### Extracts from two letters written by Olive Schreiner

*Addressed to the Social Democratic Federation of Cape Town, 5 February 1905, following the strike wave in Russia in January 1905.*

Absent bodily, I shall yet be with you in thought, and yet more with those in far off Russia who are today carrying on that 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 free speech; but which, when looked at from the highest stand-point, has always been essentially one battle fought with one end — now with success and then with seeming failure, but always bringing nearer by minute and imperceptible degrees that time in the future when for a free and united humanity a truly human life shall be possible on earth.

I regret especially that I cannot be at your meeting, because I should meet very many of our Russian Jews — members of that great race which has given to Europe its religion and the world some of its finest sons.

As a South African, it is a matter of pride and joy that we have been able to give refuge and to accept among our citizens many whom oppression drove from their birthplace. If the great struggle of our fellows in Russia tends only to diminish their sufferings, then it will not have been in vain. I believe that in this movement in Russia, we are witnessing the beginning of the greatest event that has taken place in the history of humanity during the last centuries.

[Reprinted from, S A Rochlin, 'They Helped to Shape Our Future', *South African Jewish Frontier*, September 1946]

*From the Address by Olive Schreiner, presented by S C Cronwright-Schreiner, to the Jewish Territorial Organisation, Cape Town, 1 July 1906.*

...The colossal nature of the outrages now being perpetrated on the Jews in Russia, make it inevitable that vast numbers will seek to leave their native land, not singly, but almost in bodies; and it would be of incalculable benefit to them, if, instead of having to force their way into the already over-populated

countries of Europe, a free land of their own were open to them for their immediate settlement.

...But it is not only the exile Russian Jew, fleeing from the land of his birth who demands our thoughts today; rather it is that vast body of Jews remaining in their land and at this moment exposed to tortures and wrongs, which would have stood out [as] a blot on the very darkest page in the history of the middle ages...

With regard to South Africa, I can only say that I am grateful that in the Bill now before our Parliament the language of the Russian Jew was not made a ground for excluding him.

I have no higher ambition for my native land than this — that it should be truly said of her now and for all time to come, that no man, of whatever race, or colour, or creed, fleeing from religious or political persecution had ever failed to find a refuge and a home in her. I have no loftier ambition for her than this...

The address, which fills eight typed pages contains an enthusiastic endorsement of Zionism and a eulogy to world Jewry. That was the view at the turn of the century — but not a viewpoint we share. Whether Olive Schreiner would have continued to maintain this viewpoint in the light of more recent history in the Middle East is dubious. Those readers who wish to read the document in full can undoubtedly obtain it in libraries. We will send it to any reader, on request, if the cost of copying is defrayed.

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