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He and F.S. Malan inevitably failed to have the franchise - 'the crux of the whole native question in South Africa' - extended across the colour line. The non-racial franchise of the 1853 Cape constitution was preserved in the South Africa, however, though its entrenchment survived only 26 years, not to be restored, for the whole country and without qualifications, until 1994.

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**'MEN SELLING THEIR SOULS & THE FUTURE - & FATE WATCHING THEM': OLIVE SCHREINER ON UNION**

Liz Stanley & Helen Dampier

'That scene in the house yesterday, was without any exception the most contemptible from the broad human stand-point I have ever seen in my life, which has been pretty long & varied. It seemed as though the curse of the serpent had fallen on them all - "on thy belly shall thou crawl & dust shalt thou eat." ... And as they squirmed & lied, & each one giving the other away, & all gave away principle, all the while there was Abdurahman's drawn dark intellectual face looking down at them. Men selling their souls & the future - & fate watching them. One sees strange things from that gallery!'

**Introduction**

Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) is best known as a writer of fiction of world renown. Phyllis Lewsen rightly pointed out that Schreiner's political writings are as least as important and perhaps more so; and although much Schreiner scholarship has remained fixed on her novels a minority strand has taken Lewsen's comment to heart.<sup>2</sup> Working on the more than 5000 extant Schreiner letters and preparing them for publication has confirmed to us Lewsen's perspicacity regarding Schreiner's political essays, and also emphasised the crucial importance of her letters in illuminating these political writings and the often momentous events they are concerned with.<sup>3</sup> Here we explore the interconnections between Schreiner's political writings and her letters regarding Union in South Africa.

Central to Schreiner's opposition to the 1910 Union of South Africa was her conviction that Union at basis entailed whites suspending political and other differences to combine around their economic interests to better exploit black labour and eliminate the limited political rights black men then had in the Cape. As she commented to Cape liberal politician F.S. Malan, 'it is not love that is uniting you all - it is greed'.<sup>4</sup> Schreiner's analysis provides a striking foreshadowing of the revisionist interpretations of South African history developed in the 1970s, in which liberal analyses of segregation and apartheid as founded on racist ideology were rejected in favour of a Marxist analysis in which economic development, and especially the mining industry and its migrant labour system, were seen as central. It is curious, then, that 1970s revisionism failed to credit Schreiner's path-breaking analysis of these matters, and more curious still that in post-apartheid South Africa, with its emphasis on rethinking and rewriting South African history and historiography, Schreiner is still not recognised as an important radical South African thinker.

The quotation opening our paper is from a letter to Schreiner's brother Will, a barrister, leading politician and former Prime Minister, and it emphasises that the so-called Cape liberal politicians were 'giving away principle' and 'selling souls' in supporting Union. It also powerfully invokes the presence in the Cape parliament of Abdullah Abdurahman of the African People's Organisation, in representing the 'fate' of the 'squirming and lying' erstwhile liberals and also as a symbol of the moral

judgement Schreiner is making, that whites would eventually be compelled to relinquish power and control.

From her return to South Africa from Europe in late 1889 on, Schreiner had been concerned that white groupings in South Africa would recognise the fundamental unity of their political and economic interests, as their former predominantly pastoral society gave way to capitalism and urbanisation, and combine to expropriate labour and land from black people. There are strong continuities in the development of these ideas in her successive pseudonymously published 'Returned South African' essays in the 1890s, reworked by her in 1898 and eventually published in a changed form by her estranged husband Cronwright-Schreiner as *Thoughts on South Africa* and her analysis in *The political situation*.<sup>5</sup> Her work over this period focuses on the formation of 'race' in the South African context, the establishment of capitalist production in the diamond and gold industries, the parasitic dependence of whites on black labour, and the absence of strong 'local' independent political organisation alongside endemic political corruption. It forms the backcloth to the focused analysis of what Union would entail in her 1909 essay *Closer Union*.

### *Closer Union*

A Constitutional Convention (1908-1909) was set up to recommend the form that the governmental apparatus of the four colonial powers in South Africa should take in a unified state. Schreiner's view of its workings was unequivocal: 'All those men on the Convention know that the real force hurrying them on is crush the native - cheap labour - new mines - the native territories'.<sup>6</sup> As her 9 April 1909 letter to Will Schreiner above indicates, Schreiner saw Union as being propelled by narrow self-interest among white politicians and the wider public. By contrast, her view from 1891 on was that the fundamental concern of political life should be: 'How, from our political states and our discordant races, can a great, healthy, united, organized nation be formed?'<sup>7</sup> To achieve this, she favoured a central government

concerned with defence and 'vital problems' but with individual states within a federation remaining self-governing, rather than a more far-reaching political union with a centralised state. Union in South Africa, Schreiner comments, was the 'speculator's dream of breaking down all interstatal lines which have stood out as so many small ramparts behind which freedom could hide'.<sup>8</sup> Consequently her abiding concern from the early 1890s was to help a principled liberal position on 'race' matters to survive and act as a beacon for future more radical changes to the body politic.<sup>9</sup>

Schreiner's analysis of Union and its structural flaws in *Closer Union* originated in a set of questions about the future configuration of government in South Africa she had been asked to respond to by the *Transvaal Leader*. It published her responses on 22 December 1908, with these later appearing as a short book. *Closer Union* remains a far-reaching and radical analysis pinpointing the dynamics and consequences of capitalism, the mapping of class onto race, and the likely dominance of sectional interest in South Africa's future governance. It emphasises her commitment to federalism, not just in the South African context, but as the basis of a good political life - 'I believe a body of small highly organised social units self-governing, but uniting together for the furtherance of certain common aims, to be the highest form of social organisation yet evolved for humanity, and that which, probably, will ultimately prevail throughout the world, at least for a time'.<sup>10</sup>

The core argument of *Closer Union* concerns the franchise and the need to extend, not abolish, the relatively liberal franchise in the Cape to the other South African states. Schreiner insists that all adults should have the franchise without any distinction of race, colour or gender. For her the idea that anyone born in South Africa could 'be refused any form of civic or political right... is one which must be abhorrent to every liberalised mind. I believe that an attempt to base our national life on distinctions of race and colour, as such, will, after the lapse of many years, prove fatal to us'.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, then, she also proposes there should be an equally applied education qualification within this. Recognising that at that time fewer black people could meet a literacy qualification, she argues, firstly, that their great desire for full citizenship rights would encourage black people to gain basic educational skills where they might not have done so otherwise, and secondly, that people then living under 'tribal tenure' should directly elect representatives to a federal parliament, while everyone else - black, coloured and white - should come under the ordinary franchise arrangements.<sup>12</sup>

*Closer Union* emphasises that the 'native question' is actually structural inequalities enforced by whites in polity and economy and is 'the root question in South Africa; and as it is our wisdom in dealing with it, so will be our future'.<sup>13</sup> It was the economic importance to whites of the exploited black majority that was for Schreiner the basis of the problem. The black population had grasped the limited opportunities that existed and could neither be exterminated nor transported by whites: 'Because we want him! We want more and always more of him - to labour... and to buy our goods'. Her analysis recognised that labour was the fundamental source of value in South Africa's emergent capitalist economy: 'They are the makers of our wealth, the great basic rock on which our State is founded - our vast labouring class'.<sup>14</sup>

In *Closer Union*, Schreiner in fact analyses race - or rather institutional and other forms of racism - as the defining problem of the twentieth century. The walls between



Olive Schreiner 1908.  
National Library of South Africa, PHA Collection.

continent, she points out, were breaking down and formerly distinct peoples were becoming more closely inter-related, so that:

‘The world on which the twenty-first century will open its eyes will be one widely different from that which the twentieth century sees at its awakening. And the problem the twentieth century has to solve is... [to organise] distinct human varieties on the largest and most beneficent lines, making for the development of humanity as a whole...’<sup>15</sup>

South Africa could play an important part in achieving a solution to structured inequalities of racism, she argues, because it was ‘one of the first countries to be brought face to face with the necessity for this’.<sup>16</sup> Because white South Africans were at the source of the problem, and relatedly because of their dominance, *Closer Union* insists that they should bear the responsibility for the social reconstruction required.

Schreiner states, ‘I would not willingly appeal to the lowest motives of self-interest’,<sup>17</sup> but *Closer Union* was clearly conceived with the specific purpose of appealing to white self-interest. It is in white self-interest, its argument runs, that full civil and political rights for black people should be enshrined in a federal system; it is in white self-interest that black people must be fully equal rather than exploited and brutalised; and it is in white self-interest not to bring into being a future in which generations to come, not themselves responsible for this racist system, would reap the whirlwind.

*Closer Union* recognises that this would be a long and difficult task requiring humanity and justice, but an absolutely necessary task, because even if the problem were ignored or denied by whites, it would not go away. In a rhetorically powerful passage, Schreiner asks, ‘But if we fail in this? ... then I would rather draw a veil over the future of this land’.<sup>18</sup> Actually *Closer Union* does not draw a veil at all, but points out the consequences of failure. Whites might gain economically in the short term, but in the longer term not only would black South Africans be reduced to being treated as ‘a mere engine of labour’, but they would also be demoralised and deskilled at the very time when the world’s other labouring classes were gaining education, skills and human value.<sup>19</sup> Also, ‘a far more subtle and inevitable form of evil must ultimately overtake us’, a nemesis for whites, because ‘if we raise the black man we shall rise with him; if we kick him under our feet, he will hold us fast by them’.<sup>20</sup> Brutalising and degrading other people produces the self-same qualities in those who do it. Consequently for Schreiner all the peoples of South Africa would rise or sink together, and in 1908/1909 she perceived the country as standing ‘at the parting of the ways; and there is no [white] man or woman... [who] can absolve themselves’ from moral responsibility for what would then happen.<sup>21</sup>

### The view from Schreiner’s letters

Once the South African War (1899-1902) ended, Schreiner realised that Union would be on the cards and was also aware of what the motivation for this on the part of whites would be. A 1904 letter to her sister Ettie Stakesby-Lewis, herself an activist on race matters around temperance and also illegitimacy, expresses Schreiner’s palpable concern about the political changes then in the wind:

‘The majority of the people English & Dutch in this country want Closer Union because it will enable them to crush (to wipe out as an English Eastern Province farmer said to me) the natives. Every thing one says or does which rouses them into action injures the native, & may help to bring nearer that day when seas of blood will flow. A Johannesburg man wrote to me the other day that we must hasten on the Closer Union, because native is growing more educated & intelligent every day, & if we do not crush him now, we may not be able to do it at all, &c. These things must never be written of publicly; but we must all work to promote federation instead of Unification. That is the only hope of a putting off the evil-day for the native’.<sup>22</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, Schreiner’s rejection of Union is explicitly tied to its implications for black people. While she was writing *Closer Union*, comments to her friends John and Mary Brown make clear the constancy of her worries about the ‘fate’ of the black majority because of the political changes being hatched by white interests:

‘I’m writing a thing on closer Union. If no one else will speak out for the natives I must. When done it will be published in a Transvaal paper. I seem to be writing it with blood not ink, it’s so hard to write here feeling as one does in these heights one’s pulse 105, & I don’t know if it’ll be any good when its done’.<sup>23</sup>

For Schreiner, a fundamental principle was involved which required opposition to such plans, expressed to Will Schreiner around the ‘wise ordering’ of South Africa with regard to race matters:

‘Dear, the success or failure of life is not an outward thing. Perhaps when the hour to die comes it will be some of those things which to the outer world seem most failure, which will stand us in stead, when that terrible sense of the good & great we might have accomplished if we had been wiser comes over us... / Second rate men can easily do the Prime Ministry of this country or can even work officially at its Federation. That is a thing which will be accomplished if there were only third rate men in this country. But the work that calls for great men & women here, & that none but they can accomplish, because it is a work requiring devotion to a high ideal & self obliteration is the wise ordering of our native question. That calls for the largest, the sanest, the widest intellects & hearts the world has seen. / In my small way I am doing what I can’.<sup>24</sup>

The same principle was enunciated to Malan, that to be ‘great’ in moral and political terms it was necessary to act for the benefit of all, not just for narrow sectional interests; and in the same letter she comments on the conniving or ‘buttering up’ occurring which was leading politicians to renege on their former liberal principles:



Ettie Stakesby-Lewis,  
sister of Olive and W.P. Schreiner.  
National Library of South Africa,  
Schreiner Album 3, INIL 3223.

'I am sending you a copy of my paper on Closer Union, as you may not have had time to read it in the Cape Times. / It goes to my heart to think that you & I should be wide as the poles apart in this matter. The really great South African will not be a man who stands for this or that party, or race, or sect, or language - but for all. ... / Aren't you Convention people tired of buttering each other up! When people flatter me so much I always suspect them of having some evil design! Some day the butter will all melt, & then you will fight like the Killing Cats!'<sup>25</sup>

Schreiner was equally clear that race matters were fundamental here, expressing this in connection with publication of the *Transvaal Leader* version of *Closer Union* in December 1908:

'Has it ever struck you, Malan, that the day will come when we shall need the love & devotion of the black & coloured man; just as the day will come & come soon when England & the 'Empire' will need the loyalty & love of 'white' South Africans. To-day is our hour to win their love & confidence. My dear friend, draw yourself sometimes apart from the noise & greed of the political world about you ...'<sup>26</sup>

While the Convention was taking place, Schreiner made similar comments to Jan Smuts in late 1908 stressing the centrality of race. She exhorted Smuts via Milner as representative of white politicians in general, to rise above narrow partisan interests and recognise his duty towards and responsibility for all South Africans:

'No, I don't want to come to Cape Town while this Convention is sitting. The less I think of it the happier I am. / I wish I had a copy of a letter I wrote to Milner when he first came here, to send to you only substituting your name for his). It wasn't clever, it wasn't perhaps interesting, but I held a truth, when I tried to prove to him that from the moment when he accepted a high position of rule to this country his right to act as a mere party man was gone. That not only to the Englishmen but to every Boer and every little Kaffir child to every old Hottentot walking in the veld, he owes a duty. Our duty stretches as far as our power of benefiting our fellow creatures goes. It doesn't end till that ends. / And from the man of wide powers, from him much is expected.'<sup>27</sup>

Schreiner's comments about the Convention are equally forthright in a February 1909 letter to her close British friend Edward Carpenter, where she emphasises the way in which race and class mapped onto one another in the South African context:

'I can't write about the Closer Union. It distresses me too much. If the plans of this miserable convention are carried out we stand at the beginning of a long steady downward course of 20 or 20 years [sic]. There is no hope of even that little shred of justice to the natives there has been in years past. The Rant capitalists & the retrograde Boers are going to dominate the country. We shall have native wars which for injustice & horrors will make the Boer war seem an innocent little game: & we have no working class to fight with because our working class is the natives themselves who will have no votes...'<sup>28</sup>

Before her *Transvaal Leader* article was published, Schreiner began lobbying in particular around the race matters raised by the activities and likely recommendations of the Convention. This was by no means one-sided on her part, for some of the key politicians involved similarly wanted to engage with her as a significant presence in

Who realize that the public opinion & knowledge of the world is not by a few men but by a great many. Please you my dear friend, have my love to all the friends of the cause. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me again. Please don't mind this letter.

My dear Mr. Schreiner  
 Re. Con. 20/2/1910  
 I hope you will prefer it to the matter on the ground seen the other side of the Atlantic. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me again. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me again. I am sure you will be glad to hear from me again.

these debates. In a December 1908 letter to Will Schreiner, for many months in Natal and side-lined from these key political events by being engaged as counsel to defend the Zulu leader Dinuzulu against trumped up charges, she comments about an invitation she had received:

'//I've just had a wire begging me to come down to Cape Town & stay with them<sup>29</sup> at Sea Point where they have taken a house while the convention sits. I would much like to go, because he is the one man I may be able to influence a little on the native question....'<sup>30</sup>

'They' here refers to Jan and Isie Smuts, and Schreiner's comments about attempting to influence Smuts on 'the native question' resound with her other letters to him over the long period of their correspondence, which was dominated by Schreiner's efforts to persuade Smuts to take what she called the 'broad & sane view on our native problem'.<sup>31</sup>

Distributed copies of the *Transvaal Leader* occasioned some swift replies engaging in depth with her arguments. A Johannesburg *Star* response to her article was quickly published, and an equally rapid letter was sent by Smuts, engaging with an earlier letter Schreiner had written to him (unfortunately not now extant). She also had an eye on whether Hofmeyr was playing a double game with regard to union or federation, and that the political strategies being played out had at their back union as a means of minimising imperial British influence and maximising Afrikaner control:

'I am sending you my paper in case with your wandering about you have not got it. Did you perhaps see the leader in the Johannesburg *Star* upon it? It is very brilliant & very sympathetic though opposed to me on some points. I've got a long letter from Jannie Smuts in answer to one I write him – with a copy of the article. ... / I enclose a card just got from J.H. Hofmeyr. Do you think he means what he says? I have always looked at his ^professing to ^ favour Federation as a blind, to make the English think the Boers were not all interested in wanting Unification. Isn't it strange the English can't see that Unification means the going out of English influence lock, stock, & barrel?'^<sup>32</sup>

As Schreiner fully realised, Smuts was not called 'Slim Jannie' for nothing and what she called his 'fencing' in a letter to his wife Isie, meant that discussing politics with him was ineffectual:

'My friend Lady Constance Lytton has just cabled me she has made me satisfactory arrangements for bringing out my ~~unreadable~~ article on Closer Union in Book form. Tell Jan I am going to send him a copy that he can carry about in his pocket, as I know how much he likes it & agrees with all the views!!!! / Really, I would come up to Pretoria just to have a long talk with him; but I know a politician never talks; he fences!'^<sup>33</sup>

In another letter, dated the same day, she sent Smuts a copy of her *Transvaal Leader* article with an accompanying letter in a combination of 'high' Dutch and 'low' *Taal* or early Afrikaans which amusingly plays on traditional ideas about age and authority:

'Dear Nephew Jan / I send you an article, that I have written. Read it. Think about it. I know

you are rather cleverer than I; but, God therefore allowed your old, small auntie to see something. You know, my dear Nephew Jan, when Hofmeyr and Rhodes sent you to Kimberley, that you were wrong, and the stupid, little auntie was right. You must not be like Milner, reading everything, and listening to nothing! / Do not be angry with your little auntie: that which she says, she must say. / This letter is so well written and the Dutch is so high, I shock myself. Nephew Jan will not understand, therefore I will now stop. / Auntie, / Olive. / To Nephew Jan'<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless Schreiner continued to engage with Smuts around race matters, for she truly thought he was a 'man of wide powers' and so hoped he might eventually see the political if not the moral light:

'You know my thoughts are often with you, & Malan. It would break my heart if I had to part from either of you politically. You are the two men I look forward to doing great work for South Africa when we old figures have passed away. But can you do great work unless your thoughts & ideals are larger than those of the mere racial & party politician?'^<sup>35</sup>

She had no real expectation that Smuts or his politics would change in the direction she was promoting. However, she retained hopes that the so-called 'Cape liberals' might remain true to their earlier professed principles concerning race issues and, if they did, then there was a chance that the Union platform would fail:

'I would have gone down to Cape Town but I don't care to do so while the Convention is sitting. I know; as perhaps you don't, what a farce all this buttering down of each other is. Men don't flatter each other so unless they want to get something out of each other! / ... It's strange how very fond we all are of freedom for ourselves, & how little we desire it for other people. What I am anxious to know is just where Malan & Sauer & Merriman are! If they will stand then there's a chance but I can't think they will. When the convention is over I shall go down & have a talk with Malan'.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes this had an ironical outcome revealing the depth of incomprehension of some of the men involved, as in the following letter regarding the lawyer and politician Richard Solomon:

'Got a long letter from Dick Solomon who sends affectionate greetings to you. He writes strongly sympathizing with my view of the native question – & they strangely enough adds that the only point on which he differs from me is that he prefers Unification to Federation! Even the half dozen English men I heard just now discussing the matter in the smoking room could give him points – they were all more or less opposed to the result of the Convention, but added, that it was only by Unification that we could "wash out" the native & c & c'.<sup>37</sup>

Schreiner's political contacts extended beyond the 'Cape liberal' politicians and Smuts, and included a number of important black political leaders: Solomon Plaatje, John Tengo Jabavu, Abdullah Abdurahman and Mohandas Gandhi.<sup>38</sup> Schreiner's letters include many 'Hearty greetings to Dr Abduraman and Jabavu'<sup>39</sup> comments. Also, it was not just the white liberals who had shaky politics and there were repeated thankful comments whenever Jabavu came up to muster, such as 'Jabavu seems to have stood out

finely, eh?<sup>40</sup> Following the occasion when Schreiner sat with Abdurahman in the gallery of the Cape parliament with which our discussion began, she made a strong overture of friendship to him:

'It was a great pleasure to me to meet you and your wife yesterday and I trust that our brief acquaintance may ripen into sincere friendship... As soon as the Union Parliament meets I mean to gather to gather a body of white women, and make an appeal to be heard at the bar of the house, - on ^to petition for extended rights to the native and the doing away of the colour bar^ on the ground that having no vote our voice has not been heard in the drafting of the constitution. If they refuse us I will print the speech I intended to make'.<sup>41</sup>

Such a quiet yet principled way of establishing contact is a distinctive feature of Schreiner's practical political activities and indeed her ethics of living more generally, as comments made by Gandhi about a related occasion indicates:

'Olive Schreiner and her sister, Mrs. Lewis, both came up to me when I left Cape Town, to shake hands. Dr. Abdurahman tells me that Mr. Sauer tackled her and she, in her own charming and yet refined manner, told Mr. Sauer that she merely wanted to shake hands with me. She performed this ceremony most heartily in the presence of a huge crowd and both the sisters were quite for a few minutes with us. Fancy the author of "Dreams" paying a tribute to passive resistance...'<sup>42</sup>

As soon as the Convention reported, Schreiner began to consider how best a concerted response might be made:

'I have not had time to study the results of the Convention, but among many other things this is clear - that an amount of unrestrained power quite inconsistent with the Freedom of the nation is given to the Government of the Union. / I wish you & Malan could work together. The attempt to hurry the thing up on us in the way they are doing is absolutely monstrous'.<sup>43</sup>

Although wanting to challenge and overturn the recommendations, Schreiner was keenly aware that well-meant actions might make matters worse for the people they were intended to benefit. Thus she cautions to Ettie Stakesby-Lewis in February 1909:

'Dear I think we should on no account wish for a "referendum" now. There would be a vast majority in favour of the constitution, I think. ... My idea is that our hope of ~~imp~~ up setting the convent is to keep quite quiet on the native question, in public & newspapers till the Bond Congress. If Hofmeyr & the ^a part of the^ Bond are opposed to the convention, then we must take our measures for working in Parliament. It is just possible we may get a majority of members who will not accept the convention as it stands, that might break Merriman who is our great enemy on this matter & might give us a year. If the Bond does not oppose Merriman, then of course the convention will pass. / There is not one ^white^ man in five taking the Colony as a who wants to see the native enfranchised. If we make the opposition purely one on the native question we ensure its passing. What it seems to me you might do now with great advantage is to see any members of parliament of your way of thinking like Cartwright &c; & try to strengthen them in standing against the constitution. ... / You see already in the Transvaal they are holding meetings objecting to the natives having the vote in the Cape Colony at all. We must not strengthen their hands'.<sup>44</sup>

She was equally realistic about the possibilities of other politicians supporting Schreiner's stand against the Convention recommendations. Thus the letter used as the epigraph of this paper continues:

'When I went out of the house I met Charles Molteno. He said you were quite right in your view but ~~you were~~ ^he was^ going to vote against your amendment because it "wasn't practical". You know I just felt so depressed, I went out to Sea Point on the train, I couldn't come back to the house. All those men on the Convention know, that the real force hurrying them on is crush the native - cheap labour - new mines - the native territories. / I think I was ^angry for Sauer's more polite way of treating you & your views, though quite unintentionally on my part. I'll tell you if we meet'.<sup>45</sup>

The Union became a *fait accompli*, but for Schreiner the matter was not over and done because a raft of retrograde policies and changes would follow. In terms of 'what to do', she saw little way out of what would happen because of her firm conviction that sectional racial and economic interests for whites would outweigh political and other differences between them. Thus writing to Will Schreiner about possible political course of action, she comments:

'The great practical difficulties which I feel are, two; - one, the fear, in the end, of making the future of the native worse here by rousing more hate if one appeals to England. ~~Which~~ ~~with probably~~ ^certainly^ ~~be of no use though that is the absolutely~~ Ultimately his fate is in the hands of the little, white, male, electorate of South Africa ... The other great practical difficulty is that one date not speak the full fact about the future for fear of rousing the nation to despair. ... This kind of thing one can barely write about except in private letters because speaking of it may bring it nearer! & yet how is one to act or write with force unless one does speak of this "great, open-secret"?'.<sup>46</sup>

There were related consequences for women's suffrage campaigns, with Schreiner commenting on this to her friend Miemie Murray, who was very committed to women's suffrage but a firm proponent of this 'on the same terms as men' (that is, of a racial franchise):

'Thank you much for your letter. I have sent it to Mrs Brown who will send it on to Mrs Purcell, Mrs Murray & Mrs de Villiers the advocate's wife) who will I know all agree with me that the branches must keep their own little subscriptions if the organization is to live at all, & spread. ... / Keep the little book as long as you can make any use of it, by all means. I feel very down hearted about this Unification scheme. It puts away women's enfranchisement & all advanced legislation for twenty years if it is carried...'<sup>47</sup>

Schreiner's attention was also on labour and trades unions, which could be a politically effective counterweight but again she thought sectional interests were likely to win out. As she emphasised in the 1909 letter to Edward Carpenter already quoted, and also stressed to Will Schreiner, race and class in South Africa were inextricably tied together:

'If I am better I want to read a paper to the South African white working men when I come to Cape Town, trying to point ~~it~~ out how the native question is really the labour question complicated & made virulent by the questions of colour; & urging them to stand by the

native in the struggle of the coming years'.<sup>48</sup>

In the event, a number of political deputations went to Britain to protest the Convention's recommendations and the Draft Act of Union. Will Schreiner headed a deputation of black political leaders including Abdurahman and Jabavu to London to oppose the political colour bar, although the deputation struggled to find a platform from which to voice its concerns, and were obstructed to some degree by 'liberal' politicians on the official delegation who claimed to be promoting the interests of 'the native'. Olive Schreiner wrote regularly to Will while he was in Britain, suggesting strategies for enlisting support, including politicians of her acquaintance or friendship he could enlist in the deputation's cause. However, Schreiner's strong grasp of political realities remained, indicating to her that the deputation would not be successful because Union solved a problem regarding the British imperial government reducing its role, and so any hopes should be directed to South Africa's internal political fissures and competing interests among whites:

'I am longing for a line from you to tell me what you find the tone of things there. I fear rather hopeless. The only hope for the native that I see is that as soon as the Union is fixed, the politicians will begin to fall out over spoils & places, & when the oppressors fall out, the weak sometimes come by their own! Of course many will try to make the anti-native policy the point of Union, & when they see there is likely to be division draw the native questions to the fore, to pull all together. But will they succeed? Who can say? At present of course every one is playing down to the Union, with their mouth open seeing what will fall in. When nothing falls in, or not what was expected, then the howl will begin!'<sup>49</sup>

By 1910, Schreiner's view of what Union would herald was beginning to come to pass, in particular regarding the rise of nationalism. She commented to her closest friend Betty Molteno, that 'The Dutch don't need them one any more. They are top-dog, & playing the part of top-dog',<sup>50</sup> and that this underpinned the major shake-up of South Africa's political allegiances and parties going on. In the wake of the first post-Union election, she wrote to Will Schreiner about this policy being played out regarding political office:

'... they are slowly & surely turning ~~unreadable~~ many of the best men out of all branches of the service. Of course, we must remember what they have suffered - & this is vengeance - but it goes against my grain. The only revenge a great individual or party should take is to show how much more magnanimous it can be when in power than others have been before it'.<sup>51</sup>

The aftermaths of Union around race matters continued, and at the end of 1910 Schreiner wrote to Merriman:

'I am writing partly to send you & Mrs Merriman Xmas greetings: & yet more to express to you my great appreciation of your action on so many occasions during the last months: especially when you have spoken on the native question. It is sad - but not strange - that almost every attempt at legislation during the last session has in the direction of retrogression. The attempt to make legal marriage impossible between coloured & white, is but a small indication of the tide that has set in. The wagon of South Africa is beginning

to make a long slide back-wards on the muddy road of time; & I am thankful that if you are not on the wagon chest as driver, that at least you are still walking along side to put a stone under the wheels now & then, & give a call to those oxen that are still struggling to hold things up. May you long be left to us as a country; & to the many men & women who recognize you as the ideal of outspoken rectitude in our public life'.<sup>52</sup>

This is a kind and generous overture. It is at the same time an example of Schreiner in her persuasive politically-engaging incarnation, for there are many letters alongside this written to her friends which indicate just how shaky she thought Merriman was on precisely the political issues she praises him for taking a stand on in this letter. Thus in a later 1912 letter she laments, 'I thought your speech on the Native Bill very fine, but oh if you could have seen your way to vote against the Bill! But the speech was exceedingly fine...'<sup>53</sup>

The sense of 'a long slide backwards' pervades Schreiner's letters after 1910, which take on an increasingly prophetic character with regard to the political and human fallout. An example here concerns the hawkish Free State politician Hertzog's appointment as Minister of Native Affairs. Schreiner comments about the consequences to Merriman, in part to try to keep him up to the liberal mark, again using the powerful metaphor of a wagon sliding back down a mountain-side:

'It would be impossible for me to tell you the depression I felt when I heard Hertzog had been appointed Minister for Native Affairs. But I passed through the bitterness of death in South African affairs when the Union was formed. It was then to me as if a wagon were drawn up at the top of a mountain & set slowly going back-wards over the edge - at first to move slowly but surely & steadily back-wards down a gentle slope, but gaining more & more speed as it moves down breaking & crashing everything that comes in its way, & its left at last at the bottom'.<sup>54</sup>

What stands at the back of this comment concerns political debates regarding what was to become the Natives Land Act in 1913, but was already in the political offing when this letter was written. Schreiner's later letters see this as a direct consequence of the motor-force that *Closer Union* had pinpointed as the dynamic of sectional political change in South Africa and that there would be dire future consequences to this - 'an attempt to base our national life on distinctions of race and colour, as such will, after the lapse of many years, prove fatal to us'.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion: what the letters add

Schreiner's letters show how actively involved she was in the momentous political discussion around Union. This was in practical political terms, but also in epistolary ones too. The palimpsests within them of letters from and other contacts with major politicians, who engaged with her and her ideas, brings home that they not only responded but took her seriously and saw her as an important source of opposition to retrograde policies. She used her letters to exhort and cajole the politicians concerned to act responsibly and morally, something which was backed by her publications such as *Closer Union* and other essays and open letters, and other a range of more practical political activities as well.



Schreiner's recognition of the white economic interests which motivated Union, and her opposition to the implications of this for 'the native question', as well as her analysis of the relationship between race and class, all strikingly foreshadow the 1970s revisionist interpretations of South African history, and it is important for this to be acknowledged, and for Schreiner to be taken seriously as a political as well as literary force. Her letters also reveal her joined-up thinking about these matters, and demonstrate the ways in which her analytical and political concerns flow across both her letters and published writings. And finally, in practical political terms as well as in her letters, Schreiner emphasises the need for interconnectedness; while she sees what has taken place as a political disaster wrought by whites and stresses whites' responsibility for this, she also saw where the future lay and thus her 'shaking hands' with black leaders.

## ENDNOTES

- \* All Project transcriptions of Schreiner letters in this article are 'to the letter' and contain any underlinings, insertions, deletions and mistakes in the originals. The chevron ^as thus^ indicates an insertion, deletions are crossed-through as thus, and underlines are as thus.
1. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 9 April 1909. University of Cape Town Libraries, Manuscripts & Archives Department (UCT), Olive Schreiner Collection, BC 16.
  2. Phyllis Lewsen, 'Olive Schreiner's political theories and pamphlets' in Cherry Clayton (ed.), *Olive Schreiner* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1983) 212-20; Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial conquest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the progress of feminism: evolution and the new empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Liz Stanley, *Imperialism, labour and the new woman: Olive Schreiner's social theory* (Durham, UK: Sociology press, 2002).
  3. The Olive Schreiner Letters Project is an ESRC funded (RES-062-23-1286) multi-site interdisciplinary project concerned with researching and analysing, and also publishing, Schreiner's more than 5000 letters. See [www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk](http://www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk) for frequently updated information about the project.
  4. Olive Schreiner to F.S. Malan, 6 January 1909, National English Literary Museum, (NELM), (1000.7).
  5. Olive Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa* (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1924); Olive Schreiner, *The political situation* (London: Unwin, 1896).
  6. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 10 May 1908, UCT.
  7. Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, 57.
  8. Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, 271-272, 348.
  9. Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, 336, 340-341.
  10. Olive Schreiner, 'Letter on the South African Union and the principles of government', *Transvaal Leader*, 22 December 1908, 8-9.
  11. Schreiner, *Closer Union* (London: Fifeild, 1909) 18.
  12. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 15.
  13. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 42-45.
  14. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 42-43.
  15. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 45.
  16. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 47.
  17. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 51.

18. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 49-50.
19. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 51.
20. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 53-54.
21. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 54-55.
22. Olive Schreiner to Ettie Stakesby-Lewis, January 1904, UCT.
23. Olive Schreiner to John and Mary Brown, 1909. National Library of South Africa (NLSA); Olive Schreiner Collection MSC 26.
24. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 4 June 1908, UCT.
25. Olive Schreiner to FS Malan 28 December 1908, NELM (1000.3).
26. Olive Schreiner to FS Malan, 1908-1909, NELM (1000).
27. Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 30 December 1908, National Archives Repository, Pretoria (NAR); Smuts Papers SAB, A1.
28. Olive Schreiner to Edward Carpenter, 19 February 1909, Sheffield Archives, Archives & Local Studies, Sheffield; Edward Carpenter.
29. 'They' refers to the Smuts's; see Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 1 December 1908, NAR.
30. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 1 December 1908, UCT.
31. Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 19 October 1920, NAR.
32. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 28 December 1908, UCT.
33. Olive Schreiner to Isie Smuts, 1908-1909, NAR.
34. Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 21 December 1908, NAR. Schreiner's original letter is as follows: 'Lieve Neef Jan / Ik stuur voor jou een "article", de ik greschryven het. Lees dit. Dink daar o'er. Ik veet jy is vanje slimmer als ik; maar, God het daarom voor jou oude, kleine, tanteje iets laat zien. Jy weet, mein lieve Neef Jan, toen Hofmeyr en Rhodes voor jou naar Kimberley gestuur het, dat jy was verkeerd, en de domme, kleine tanteje het recht gehad. Jy moet niet zo als Milner w.ees, om alles te lezen, en niets ter luisteren! / Wees niet kwaad f voor jouw kleine tante: die wat zy moet zeg, die moet zy zeg. / Die Brief is zoo goed geschreven en die Hollands is zoo hoog, ik vrees my. Neef Jan zal het niet verstaan, daarom zal ik nu op-hou. / Tante, / Olive. / de Ar / Dec 21st 1908 / Toe Neef Jan.'
35. Olive Schreiner to Jan Smuts, 1 December 1908, NAR.
36. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 30 December 1908, UCT.
37. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 12 February 1909, UCT.
38. Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier (2010) "I trust that our brief acquaintance may ripen into sincere friendship": Networks across the race divide in South Africa in conceptualising Olive Schreiner's letters 1890-1920,' Olive Schreiner Letters Project Working Paper Series 'Letters, Letterness and Epistolary Networks'.
39. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 12 July 1909, UCT.
40. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 8 August 1909, UCT.
41. Olive Schreiner to Abdullah Abdurahman, 9 April 1909, UCT.
42. M.K. Gandhi to Henry Cotton, 14 July 1909, *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 9, (New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India, 1999), 408.
43. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 12 February 1919, UCT.
44. Olive Schreiner to Ettie Stakesby-Lewis, 28 February 1909, UCT.
45. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 9 April 1909, UCT.
46. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 7 May 1909, UCT.
47. Olive Schreiner to Miemie Murray, 28 February 1909, NELM (2001.24).
48. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 24 April 1909, UCT.
49. Olive Schreiner to Will Schreiner, 27 July 1909, UCT.
50. Olive Schreiner to Betty Molteno, July 1910, UCT.
51. Olive Schreiner to John X. Merriman, 25 October 1910, UCT.
52. Olive Schreiner to John X. Merriman, 22 December 1910, NLSA; John X. Merriman Collection MSC 15.

53. Olive Schreiner to John X. Merriman, June 1912, NLSA.
54. Olive Schreiner to John X. Merriman, 2 July 1912, NLSA.
55. Schreiner, *Closer Union*, 8.

**'HULLE GAAT DIE STROP OM ONSE NEK SIT': DR ABDULLAH ABDURAHMAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE MAKING OF UNION VOICED THROUGHPIET UITHALDER'S 'STRAATPRAATJES' COLUMN**

*Mohamed Adhikari*

Founded in Cape Town in 1902, the African Political Organization (APO) was the first substantive coloured political association, and subsequently dominated coloured protest politics for nearly four decades.<sup>1</sup> After an initial period of volatility characterised by infighting amongst its leaders, the organization found stability when the feuding president and vice-president were expelled in a coup engineered by Matthew Fredericks, the general secretary, at its 1905 annual conference and a young, dynamic, medical doctor, Abdullah Abdurahman, was elected president. Under the energetic leadership of Abdurahman the APO grew into South Africa's largest black political organization over the next five years, its success fuelled largely by apprehension over intensifying segregationism and dissatisfaction around the terms of Union amongst politicised coloured people. By the time of Union the APO had grown into a national body with several thousand members organised into a countrywide network of branches.

During the wave of protests that preceded the unification of South Africa the APO decided to publish its own newspaper to represent the interests of the coloured



Matthew Fredericks and Dr Abdullah Abdurahman. Detail from a photograph of the Joint Delegation to London in 1909. National Library of South Africa, APO Album III, INIL 11807.