

Olive Schreiner

feisty feminist and anti-racist



Wits Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand

Olive Schreiner (1855 - 1920)

Olive Emilie Albertine Schreiner was born, the ninth of twelve children, on 24th March 1855 to missionary parents Rebecca (nee Lyndall) and Gottlob Schreiner in Wittebergen in the Cape near the Basutoland border. Her father died in poverty after he had been discharged from the London Missionary Society for illegal trading. At the age of 15, Olive had to find work as a teacher governess.

Her famous novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, which explores the injustice of racism and the oppression of women was published in 1883. Olive used the male pseudonym 'Ralph Iron' because of the prejudice against women writers at that time. She only admitted that she was the author seven years later. Her novel was widely acclaimed and was followed by several other important works of fiction and non-fiction.

In 1894 she married Samuel Cronwright, who, at her request, added her surname to his. He supported her work and her feminism. Their only child died at birth.

Olive became one of the Vice-Presidents of the Women's Enfranchisement League of the Cape Colony formed in 1907 to campaign for women's right to vote. But she left some time around 1914 because the League wanted to fuse with other leagues across the country, which she thought would make it become racist. Olive wanted all women to be able to vote. White women in South Africa got the vote in 1930; black women only in 1994!

Olive was in England during the First World War and suffered discrimination because of her German surname. After living in England for a while, she returned to South Africa when she sensed she did not have much time left. Olive struggled with ill-health for most of her life. She died in 1920 and is buried with her daughter and her dog, Nita, in a mountain tomb near Cradock in the Karoo.

Photographs, Letters and Pamphlets – Historical Sources

In this lesson plan, learners are asked to find out about Olive Schreiner's attitudes, ideas and relationships from studying photographs, letters and pamphlets.



Source A

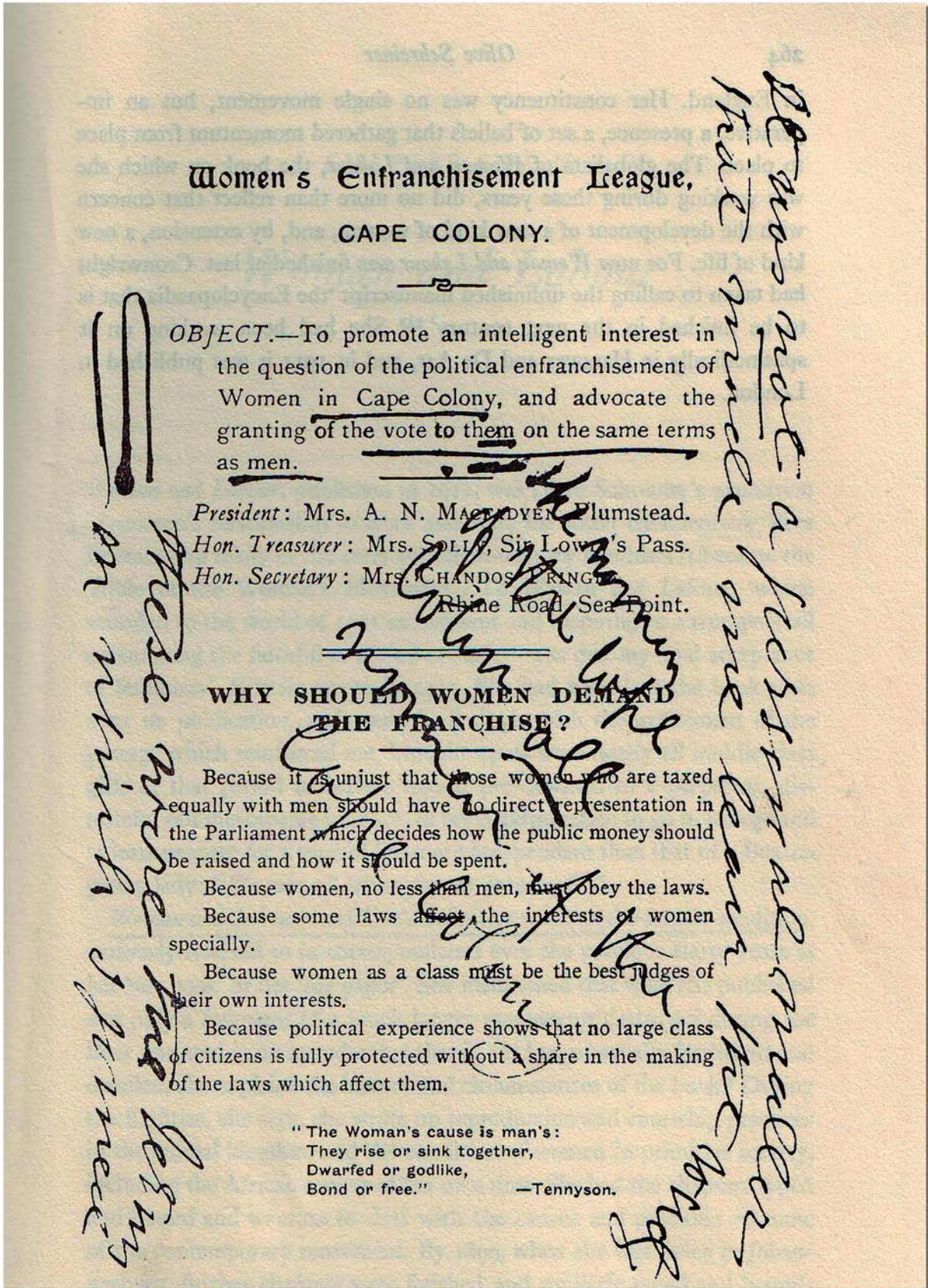


Olive during one of her walks with a young African servant, date unknown Ruth First and Ann Scott. *Olive Schreiner: a Biography*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1980

Source B



Olive Schreiner with her husband MuseuAfrica



Olive scrawled over this pamphlet in the left margin: 'These were the terms on which I joined'. In the right margin she wrote: 'It was not a personal matter that made me leave the society.' In the centre she wrote: 'The women of the Cape Colony all women of the Cape Colony.'

Source D: Extract from Olive's letter to Edward Carpenter

The Homestead, Kimberly, South Africa
October 1894

Dear old Edward Carpenter

.... A man and a woman stand in the same relation to each other as a white man to a black man, supposing the two to have struck up a deathless friendship and to have determined to live together. It would not do for the black man to be dependent on the white because at least in this country there are centuries of tradition of the inferiority of the black and the superiority of the white: of submission on one side and masterhood on the other; and these traditions ... have affected both, that if the monetary power were on one side I believe a friendship of true equality would be impossible between the two. Just so with a man and a woman, with 2,000 years of slavish submission on one side and animal dominance on the other ... they can *neither* of them afford anything which tends to keep up those traditions.

With regard to my own marriage, dear, I will only say it is an ideally happy one...

Love to all the friends at Millthorpe
Olive

Typed transcription of letter from Olive Schreiner to Edward Carpenter



Olive Schreiner's passport photo
MuseuMAfrica

Source E: Olive suffers discrimination. Letter to Emily Hobhouse

To Miss E. Hobhouse Mayer Lake, Bude (during the First World War).

When I told her (landlady in England) my name she turned and glared at me... She asked if my name was not German. I said it was, but I was a British subject born in South Africa, that my husband was a British subject of pure British descent, and my mother was English, that my father who left Germany 80 years ago, was a naturalized British subject, and had been dead nearly 50 years. She turned round and stormed at me, all her seemingly gentle face contorted with rage and hate. She said that if my ancestors came from Germany "three hundred years ago" it would make no difference, no one with a German name should come into her house... I was feeling so ill and worn out, that I dropped into a chair and burst out crying... I could only say, "It isn't because you are so unkind to me, it's because all the world's so wicked."

Letter from Olive Schreiner to Emily Hobhouse, Bude, no date, probably 1914. Published in Cronwright-Schreiner, SC (ed). The Letters of Olive Schreiner, 1876 – 1920. (London: T Fisher Unwin Ltd, 1924), p. 341

Source F: Olive hisses speakers

To Miss E. Hobhouse London (March)

... I am so sick of English jingo-ism and self-glorification which ever, under the guise of a "peace" meeting, always comes out. I went to one peace meeting, and I and many of the audience hissed some of the speakers and called "Peace! Peace! We want peace" It was supposed to be a peace meeting; and some of the women began to talk of how they could help the war!!!

Letter from Olive Schreiner to Emily Hobhouse, London, probably March 1915. Published in Cronwright-Schreiner (ed), 1924, p. 348

Learner Activities

- What does *Source A* suggest about Olive's attitude to the 'African servant'?
- What do *Sources B & D* suggest about Olive's relationship with her husband in the early days of their marriage?
- After reading *Source D* say why Olive kept her own account when she married.
- What point is Olive making in *Source D* by comparing the relationship between a black person and a white person who are close friends, and a man and a woman who marry?
- Olive's angry scrawls in *Source C* tell us why she left the League. What were her reasons?
- In *Sources E and F* we learn a lot about Olive's attitude to war and nationalism – what was it?
- If Olive Schreiner were alive today what causes would she take up; what protest marches or meetings would she join; and what kinds of novels would she write?

Other Ideas

Collaborate with the English teacher to find some of Lyndall's arguments about the fate of women in *The Story of an African Farm*.

Criteria for Assessment

- Learners will be able to detect and express visual clues to Olive's relationships with people pictured.
- Learners will understand the parallel Olive draws in her argument about the perpetuation of women's 'traditional inferiority' and black people's 'inferiority'.
- Learners will be able to read from Olive's own accounts her hatred of war and the nationalist feelings associated with it, as well as her opposition to racism.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 3

LO 2, AS 1 & 2

LO 3, AS 3

Grade 11 Content Link – Imperialism and World War 1; Competing nationalisms and identities in Africa – English jingoism.

