THE LETTERS OF ALICE GREENE
Born 8 March 1858 - Died 28 January 1920
TWO BOOKS OF LETTERS OF INTEREST TO HISTORIANS AND SOCIOLOGISTS

ALICE GREENE
Teacher and Campaigner
South African Correspondence 1887–1902
Edited by
John E. Barham

The Mother
and the Maiden Aunt
Letters of Eva and Alice Greene 1909-1912
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Alice went out to South Africa for health reasons in 1887, at the age of 29, to teach at the Collegiate School for Girls in Port Elizabeth. There she met another teacher, Elizabeth (Betty) Molteno, a South African whose father had been the first prime minister of Cape Colony. Their relationship was to last until Alice’s death in 1920.

In her letters she expresses her concern for her family, in particular her mother and her youngest sister, Helen, to whom she was particularly close and both of whom she helped financially. The other person to whom she was close was her eldest brother, Graham, who looked after her affairs in England.

She travelled extensively, by train and Cape cart, the latter must have been extremely uncomfortable, but was the only way of reaching farms where she and Betty stayed when on holiday. Daily life at school is hardly mentioned but episodes, usually humorous, get reported in detail.

It was the events which followed the Jameson raid at the end of 1895 which aroused Alice’s interest in Cape Politics and when the Boer war started towards the end of 1899 she and Betty both sided with the Boers. This had two effects, the first was that she and Graham, who was a senior official in the Admiralty in London, agreed to disagree over the actions of the British government. The second was that Miss Molteno decided not to renew her lease of the school so they could move to Cape Town where they participated in the relief work to help the Boer women in the Camps. They helped Emily Hobhouse whose revelations about the conditions in the Camps caused an uproar when she returned to England. Another important friend was the author Olive Schreiner and they also knew many of the leading politicians in Cape Colony. Alice returned to England in July 1902 and Betty followed a few weeks later: they were to remain active in South African affairs for the rest of their lives.

These letters between Alice, the Maiden Aunt, and her much younger sister-in-law, Eva, are a complete contrast to those in the first book. Alice was living in England and after Eva’s husband, known in the family as Eppy, returned to Brazil in March 1909 she stayed with Eva until after the birth of her fifth child in May.

After Eva’s return to the port of Santos in Brazil her letters to Alice are full of news about the five children but she is so busy that her letters are written in odd moments over several days. She gives a wonderful idea of her life and describes some of the social rituals, which she found so tiresome.

Alice’s letters are full of her activities, including visits to Geneva where Betty Molteno spent much of her time. She provided news of her five siblings as well making doting comments about Eva’s children.

In 1910 Eppy’s business required him and his family to move to England: the correspondence was naturally much reduced but Alice and Eva did meet. In April 1912 Alice returned to South Africa where she and Betty remained until 1916 but only one letter has survived from these years.

One surprise was to discover Eva’s friendship with Olive Schreiner, the South African author and long time friend of Alice and Betty Molteno, who had come to England at the end of 1913.