This book delivers a complex reading of Olive Schreiner's politics and writing that locates her work in the wider context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideas about women, progress and imperialism. In late nineteenth-century Europe, the notion that human beings were developing in a way that signalled 'progress' was used to make sense of the rapid economic, political and social changes of that period. Burdett focuses on ways in which, for a colonial woman of Schreiner's political sensibilities, progress was a highly problematic concept, linked as it often was with notions of racial hierarchies and exploitative capitalist development, to say nothing of its ambiguous relationship with women.

Burdett's first three chapters address these themes through the lens of some of Schreiner's most important works, including The Story of an African Farm, Woman and Labour and From Man to Man. Chapter 2 contains a rather lengthy discussion of Karl Pearson's eugenics, and Schreiner's response to his ideas in Woman and Labour, where she argued against the narrow reproductive role advocated by eugenicists as women's only useful function. Schreiner described this limiting role as parasitic. Burdett is careful to emphasise that although Schreiner initially found Pearson intellectually stimulating and 'fit her argument as closely as possible to the kinds of demand Pearson might make of it', she nevertheless opposed his rigid eugenicist views and obsessive belief in scientific rationalism, and so arrived at 'different conclusions'.[s] (p. 49) Burdett's
emphasis of this break with Pearson is an important counter to past depictions of Schreiner as a racist Social Darwinist. Nevertheless, Burdett devotes a large portion of chapter 2 to a discussion of Pearson’s view, perhaps according too much weight to his influence on Schreiner.

South Africa’s dubious progress towards modernity through industrialisation and capitalist expansion, and the political and human consequences of this, are the chief themes of chapters 4 and 5, and are discussed in relation to what Burdett terms Schreiner’s ‘South African writing’, including *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, *Thoughts on South Africa* and *An English-South African’s View of the Situation*. Chapter 5 focuses on the South African war of 1899-1902, and Schreiner’s political analysis of this conflict. Her support for the Boer cause is analysed in relation to her opposition to the tyranny of big capital, which in South Africa took the form of powerful mining companies. Schreiner believed that the ‘capitalism-resistant, pre-modern’ Boer was a bulwark that stood between South Africa and the brutal forces of industrial capital, and she was also keenly aware that in the colonial context, capitalist exploitation effectively equalled race exploitation (p. 152). Burdett points out that while twentieth-century critics have condemned Schreiner’s support for the Boers, who were frequently characterised as racist and backward, she backed the Boer republics in the hope their political resistance would weaken the hegemony of the forces of imperial capitalism, which she knew would inevitably take its terrible toll on black South Africans.

Burdett reveals Schreiner as a woman who was fiercely anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and a committed feminist, but who was always sensitive to the vastly different and complex ways in which her politics articulated with conditions in South Africa. Indeed, Burdett argues that as a woman living in colonial South Africa, Schreiner was uniquely placed to engage with the multifarious interconnections between gender, progress and imperialism: “Part of the argument of this book will be that the so-called “margins” were often more central than the “centre” in articulating and enacting what might loosely be called the issues of modernity” (p. 7). Schreiner was fully conscious that progress could not mean the same things in different places and to different people, that what “‘leaves Europe a white-garbed bird of peace and justice, too often turns up, after its six-thousand miles’ passage across the ocean, a black-winged harbinger of war and death’” (p. 152). She believed that women had a central role to play in bringing about real progress. Like many other women at the time, she agitated for change and for opportunities for women to join in public life and the ‘March of Progress’. As a pioneering feminist thinker, Schreiner was nonetheless mindful that as they entered the public domain of ‘progress’, women in the metropolis were becoming increasingly ‘implicated in the narratives of progress and modernity which constructed national and imperial
identities' (p. 171). In South Africa certainly, feminism did not simply equal progress, as Schreiner's later experiences with the Cape-based Women's Enfranchisement League highlighted for her. Schreiner resigned from the League when she discovered that its objective was to obtain the franchise on the same terms as men, meaning that the vote would be for white women only (p. 175).

In addition to its main focus on Schreiner's writing and thinking, the text offers some brief biographical information, although it does not draw on Schreiner's many unpublished letters, and tends to focus mostly on Schreiner's best known works. The footnotes provide useful supplementary information and references; the bibliography offers a helpful guide to relevant material. Burdett's book is a dense, sophisticated exploration of the complexities of Schreiner's thinking and writing, and examines its subject in a broad and fully contextualised way, making explicit the connections between Schreiner's writing and the politics of progress, gender and imperialism, just as Schreiner herself sought to 'make [such] connections.' (p. 7) As such, this book makes a valuable contribution to Schreiner scholarship.

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