Olive Schreiner (1855–1920) was, after publication of her first novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and a string of high-profile work (allegories, political essays) following, one of the world’s most famous women. Contra the contention of her estranged husband (S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, also her very controlling first biographer) that she wrote little, Schreiner’s published works line up impressively and present some interesting problems for present-day scholars, which are responded to deftly by Carolyn Burdett in her excellent contribution to Northcote House’s deservedly well-known “Writers and Their Work” series.

Following *The Story of an African Farm*, many of Schreiner’s allegories appeared in journals and magazines, and then in *Dreams* (1890) and *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893), while her reputation as an insightful commentator on political matters connected with imperialism and “race” was confirmed by publication of her 1890s “Returned South African” essays (brought together in the posthumous *Thoughts on South Africa* [1924]), *The Political Situation* (1896), an allegorical political novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) and an anti-war polemic *An English South African’s View of the Situation* (1899), followed by *Closer Union* (1909). Her *Woman and Labour* (1911) appeared to triumphant reviews and was dubbed (by Vera Brittain) the “bible of the women’s movement”.

Posthumous publications, in addition to *Thoughts on South Africa*, include two novels, *Undine* (1923) and *From Man to Man* (1926), and another book of allegories, *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923). Alongside this not inconsiderable list (which omits the many shorter writings she also published), Schreiner was an indefatigable diarist, journal writer and letter writer. However, Cronwright-Schreiner was a fixer with a particular vision, which he enforced by producing a biography and an edition of letters, and edited the posthumous publications in accordance with his “damaged failed genius” view of her; and he then destroyed as many original manuscripts, diaries, journals and letters as he could lay his hands on. What remains are the published sources, a
scant few manuscripts and roughly 5000 letters out of the probably 20,000 or more that existed at Schreiner’s death. Always, then, present-day commentary has to reckon with his fixing and also his destructions.

Burdett’s approach to textual matters is thorough and insightful, and throughout relates the writings discussed to the contexts in which they were written. Her exploration starts with *Undine* and *The Story of an African Farm*, which were both written in the very early 1880s (as were the interconnected “Diamond Fields” and “New Rush”, which are not discussed and of which just traces remain). *From Man to Man*, originally written over the same time period but later much edited and overwritten, is discussed as part of Schreiner’s “sex work” in the chapter following, together with *Woman and Labour* and Schreiner’s two main collections of allegories (*The Life...*) and *Dreams and Allegories* is mentioned in passing, but with the quintessential “New Woman” short story “The Buddhist Priest’s Wife” in it hovering undiscussed in the margins, although the equally important “Eighteen-ninety-nine” in the same volume is discussed. The third and final chapter, “A Returned South African”, covers Schreiner’s political essays in *Thoughts on South Africa*, *The Political Situation* and the novella *Trooper Peter Halket*, and provides a briefer comment on *Closer Union*.

This is highly commendable coverage in a short book (87 pages of text, plus notes and references), so the occasional gaps and some omissions of important works of criticism are a small price to pay for the thoughtful readings and interpretations sustained across all of the chapters. However, I longed for a final overviewing chapter—just what does Carolyn Burdett make of it all? What is her summation now, a good few years on from her riveting *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism* (2001)? Another book is to be hoped for in addition to this one, in which she spells this out.

This raises the question of why Cronwright-Schreiner’s fixing and destructions need to be reckoned with. The relative absence of primary sources (in effect all but a few sheets of many diaries and journals were destroyed, the vast majority of manuscripts were destroyed and all the letters in his possession were destroyed) puts a great weight on his editorial activities as a controlling biographer and editor of Schreiner’s letters—apart, that is, from the extant letters that escaped his ministrations, a point returned to later. Ninety years on from the 1924 publication of his ur-Schreiner (*The Life...*) and ur-letters (*The Letters...*) and their supposed facts, Cronwright-Schreiner’s grip remains if not intact, then at points still disconcertingly firm. And so, for instance, he could not have recalled Schreiner at a Rhodes dinner party (10) banging her head on a table, for he did not know her at that point, and anyway this was his exaggeration of Schreiner sending herself up; and no, it was not his encouragement that led to her political essaying (68), for this was under way well before he arrived on the scene; and there is actually evidence that she
intended to publish “Eighteen-ninety-nine” (83), but the tide of Afrikaner indifference after the South African War of 1899–1902 stymied this. This raises the existence of a countervailing set of facts and writings, enabling a substantial rereading of the entire Schreiner oeuvre, not just small challenges to the Cronwright-Schreiner view such as these.

This is formed by Schreiner’s remaining 5000 or so original letters, most of which had never been read or commented on by Schreiner scholarship until their publication in transcript form as the free-access Olive Schreiner Letters Online in January 2012, a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which I headed. This provides Schreiner’s complete extant letters, unexpurgated and non-bowdlerized, warts and all, and with every insertion, omission and “mistake” included. Burdett generously recognizes its potential to “hopefully precipitate major reassessment” (9), and it is greatly to be regretted that her book was completed before its publication, so that only “some of its material has been incorporated at revisions stage” (88). Hopefully, there will be another, more substantial Burdett volume on Schreiner’s work and writings to follow this excellent short guide, which will carry out such a major reassessment. In the meantime, Burdett’s Olive Schreiner is far and away the best guide to Schreiner’s published work and is greatly welcomed.

Note


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