News from August 1911: Schreiner on Will Schreiner not speaking at the Races Congress & on ‘the dreadful suffragette Con seen at close quarters’

Olive Schreiner’s upset and disappointment that Will Schreiner had failed to speak at the Universal Races Congress in London (which had met in July) is palpable in the letter to him below, and this is expressed in both an upfront and also a quite subtle way.

Rarely if ever in Schreiner’s hundreds of letters to Will does she directly criticise him, so that she does so here is a measure of her depth of feeling. She felt very strongly indeed about the ‘black peril’ moral panic that had been manufactured as a way of legitimating the retrograde legislation against black people which had been introduced immediately following on Union of the four settler states in 1910, and among her most interesting letters are a group to James Henderson, head of a missionary commission set up to investigate (and rebut) black peril claims, which show that she was involved in a very hands on way in rebutting such ideas, seeing the ‘peril’ as that of black women at the hands of white men.

The letter also refers to one of Schreiner’s most loved friends, Constance Lytton, who is the ‘dreadful suffragette Con’ affectionately and ironically referred to, with Adela being Con Lytton’s cousin and another close friend of Schreiner’s. The ‘sweet boy’ is Schreiner’s much loved nephew Oliver and ‘my darling girl’ is her niece Lyndall, known as Dot, while Ursula is her younger niece.

The close of the letter has a decided sting in the tail – the Rhys Davids are the famous exponents and translators of Buddhist philosophy, and as Schreiner points out, Will won’t have met them because he didn’t speak at the Congress.
speech & your influence. I can’t understand how it was that time was
made for Mrs Macfadyen’s speech – she representing a tiny society –
while you the leading representative of the native interests in South
Africa & the Races Congress branch here did not speak. I would have
made a great effort to write something on this native peril question
this mad hysterical fashion – if I had not thought you would speak
much better & with more weight, than anything any thing I should have
said.

// I am very anxious to know how you all enjoyed your tea at Adelas, &
what "Sweet boy Oliver" as Mrs Purcell calls him, thought of that
dreadful suffragette Con when seen at close quarters. My darling girl
leaves me tomorrow. I’ve not had such a happy time for years as this
two weeks she’s spent with me. She looks wonderfully better; has
nearly lost her cough. I fancy think not that its real asthma, but
that it is of the nature of asthma. She is sitting by the fire now
reading "the Prince" by Machiavelli in which she is intensely interest,
she has just finished "Romola" by George Elliot. She is soon
going out for a game of golf, as its a lovely afternoon, cold dry
still & bright. We managed after much difficulty to raise two old
horses belonging to different men & a cart belonging to a third & ha I
have taken her out to see four Boer farms. The old "frek ooi" we had
for dinner at one, made a great impression on her!! I am so glad we
have had such delightful weather while she was here.

The oldest farmer living in this part never remembers to have had such
rains as we have had this winter – the veld is quite green even here.
I do hope she will carry out her idea of reading law. If she
doesn’t complete her course it will not be knowledge thrown away - &
if she does she can open the way for other women to the bar, for other
women – even if she never cared to practise. She has a fine
intellect & a fine many sided nature which would fit her peculiarly to
be a mother. And if in this this narrow little world of South Africa
– the whole *white* population of Cape Town is smaller than that of my
European Provincial towns!) – she does not find any one she can &
ought to marry, she *must* have some outlet for her powers or she
will rust & become *imbittered.*

I am so glad you’ve gone to Norway to get out of the heat for the
dear old heart. I’m glad you saw something of the Purcells. Mrs
Purcell was much attracted to Oliver; "Sweet boy Oliver" as she calls
him! And old Merriman wrote very enthusiastically about both our young
ones. Dear Laddie, if Ursula takes to the idea of studying medicine
don’t stand in her way. After all, she can come out to see you as
Dot did & if she begins next year, she will not be older than Oliver &
Will when will be, when she fits herself for earning her own living.
She would only be 23 or 24 when she finished. I don’t say press her,
but if she chose a profession let her have it if you possibly can
manage it.

I hope you have seen Adela’s little ones; especially little Olive.

I am longing for next post to bring me Adela’s letter. I know she
will tell me about you all. I fear you did not see my friends the Rhys
Davids’es as if you did not speak at the congress they will not have
known you were there.

Good bye dear. I like to think of you in the dear old Europe I love so.

Cron sends love.

Your little sister

Olive