News from October 1911: Schreiner on women’s suffrage and Aletta Jacob’s visit

On an international tour with Carrie Chapman Catt as part of their Women’s International Suffrage Alliance activities, Aletta Jacobs and her friend Nellie Boersma briefly visited Schreiner at her home in De Aar. Jacobs had translated into Dutch Schreiner’s landmark feminist text *Woman and Labour*, published in English early in 1911.

The visit, and Jacobs herself, is written of warmly by Schreiner in writing to other people, a correspondence between her and Jacobs ensured, and at least two visits later took place in Holland. It is however recollected differently and negatively in the memoir which Jacobs wrote – perhaps influenced by Schreiner’s fury at the soon-to-happen intervention of Catt in South African franchise matters in encouraging its Women’s Enfranchisement League societies. Catt supported, and wanted them to support, the franchise ‘on the same terms as men’, and this meant a racist franchise in South Africa post-Union in 1910, which Schreiner opposed to the point of resigning from the Cape Town WEL when it happened.

By ‘Dutch’ in this letter, Schreiner is referring to the people now know as Afrikaners and more generally as Boers (which literally means farmers) up to around this time. The letter also displays one of Schreiner’s activities as a high profile cultural entrepreneur, in fixing introductions between people from very different kinds of networks but both known to Schreiner herself.

Letter Reference | Aletta Jacobs Papers AHJ/278
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Archive | Aletta, International Archives for the Women’s Movement, Amsterdam
Epistolary Type | Letter
Letter Date | After Start: September 1911; Before End: September 1911
Address From | De Aar, Northern Cape
Address To | c/o Miss Ida Hyett, 304 Prinsloo Street, Pretoria, Transvaal
Who To | Aletta Jacobs
Other Versions | [Aletta Jacobs Papers AHJ/278]

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Legend
Olive Schreiner's letters to Aletta Jacobs are part of the International Archives for the Women's Movement collections, to whom thanks are due for access to the microfilm of the Aletta Jacobs Papers. The address which this letter was sent to is on an attached envelope, which does not have a postmark or stamp. Aletta Jacobs with her friend Nettie Boersma visited Schreiner in De Aar in late August 1911, and thus the dating of this letter. Schreiner was resident in De Aar from late 1907 to December 1913, when she left for Europe.

1: Dear Dr Jacobs
2:
3: You don’t know what happiness your visit gave me – only I can’t
4: bear to think I shall never see you again.
5:
6: I am afraid you must have found the great height here very tiring for
7: your heart, but you will have felt better as soon as you got lower.
8:
9: I enclose two letters of intro-duction, one to my dear friend General
10: Smuts’s wife, & one to my friend Mrs Sauer the wife of the acting
11: Prime Minister, who is Minister of Railways for the Union.
12:
13: I am sure you will like both.
14:
15: I am sending Mrs Boersma’s book. I was so glad to meet you don’t
16: know how in this solitary life it fills one’s heart with joy to meet
17: one’s owne 20th century women.
18:
19: I do hope you will manage that meeting at Graaff Reinet & see my
20: friend Mrs Murray.
21:
22: I am only sending you letters of intro-duction to Dutch women because
23: I know you will have only too many introductions to the English.
24:
25: My affectionate thoughts will always follow you.
26:
27: Yours ever
28: Olive Schreiner
29:

Notation
Aletta Jacobs and Carrie Chapman Catt with various friends were on a world tour from July
1911 to July 1912. They were in South Africa from mid August to late October 1911, and in
Pretoria in late September or early October that year. The book Mrs Boersma which had lent
Schreiner during the visit she and Aletta Jacobs made to Schreiner in late August cannot be
established.