News from September 1911: Schreiner on women’s suffrage

This Olive Schreiner letter was written to Caroline Murray, the married sister of Schreiner’s closest friend Betty Molteno, the partner (in a school, also in life) of Alice Greene, both mentioned in the letter. However, its main concern is dealt with firmly but calmly – as the then-President of the Cape Town Women’s Enfranchisement League, Caroline Murray with its other officers wanted to join a confederation at province-level that would be a meta-organisation of representatives from the Cape, Natal, Free State and Transvaal societies. Schreiner’s opposition is made very clear, and was also developed more generally in her Closer Union, published initially as open letters in newspapers in late 1908 and then as a short book in 1909. The crux of her opposition was that this would lead to a majority policy of ‘the vote for women on the same terms as men’ in the forthcoming Union of the South African provinces, and therefore a racist policy to which Schreiner was totally opposed.

But as this letter also makes clear, Schreiner’s objections went wider as well. For her, ‘mere bigness never appeals’, for her conviction was that a plethora of small-scale organisations encouraged diversity and democracy and inhibited oligarchy of the kind she identified with the emergent structure of the WEL at Union of South Africa level.

Schreiner’s letter also mentions the visit to her home in De Aar of Dutch feminist and International Women’s Suffrage Alliance member Aletta Jacobs, who was on a world tour with Carrie Chapman Catt from the US society. More of Aletta Jacobs and this visit, in next month’s news from Schreiner’s 1911 letters!

Letter Reference    Olive Schreiner BC16/Box4/Fold4/1911/43
Archive             University of Cape Town, Manuscripts & Archives, Cape Town
Epistolary Type     Letter
Letter Date         6 September 1911
Address From        De Aar, Northern Cape
Address To          Kenilworth House, Kenilworth, Cape Town, Western Cape
Who To              Caroline Murray nee Molteno
Other Versions

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Legend
The address this letter was sent to is provided by an attached envelope.

1: De Aar
2: Sep 6th 1911
3:
4: Dear Mrs Murray
5:
6: It was so nice to see your handwriting again have you any news of
7: Betty’s movements. She & Alice Greene wrote me some weeks ago that
8: they were coming out almost at once. But I have not heard from them
since. I wonder if they are on the way out!

//As to you joining the Transvaal & other suffrage societies, its a
matter on which I prefer to give no advice as members of the Woman’s
Enfranchisement League might think I was interfering in their concerns.
You know I have always been as little in favour of the union of all
South African woman’s societies as I have always been against the
Union of the S.A. States except in the form of a not too close
federation; but I know none of you have agreed with me. I would see
nothing great or desirable in you & Lady Innes & Mrs de Vaal breaking
down your houses & building a big one in which you all had to live
together. You are much better & happier as you are. Mere bigness never
appeals to me. An ant or a butterfly are to me much more perfect &
noble than the biggest crocodile! And little Switzerland & Holland
much more interesting & happy that big Russia or the whole British
Empire. Emerson says "we descend to meet." I know we often sacrifice
our principles & our individuality when we try to form
connections with those with whom we are not in deep spiritual unity. I
believe the woman’s cause is progressing so fast in England just
because there are such an immense number of different women’s
societies, unconnected with each other; with different aims &
appealing to different classes of women. All women are no more alike
than all men!!! We are one half of the Human Race on earth, & except
in the one point of sex function differ quite as much from each other
as from men. P

Dr Jacobs spent a day with me with her Dutch friend. It was a red
letter day with me. She is a splendid woman. I have also had my niece
Lyndall here with me for a fortnight. I felt like an old hen who had
lost her only chicken when she went. She is a sweet child. How happy
you must be with your two big daughters.

How is Dr Parker? Where are May & Kathleen? I shall perhaps be coming
down to Cape Town in the summer to stay at Blauwberg where my sister
Mrs Lewis is staying & which she finds very good for her heart Whether
it will suit me as well I am a little doubtful. I shall spend a little
time in Cape Town before I go there just to see you all.

I’ve got such a sweet letter from dear Emily Hobhouse which I must
answer today.

Good bye. I am looking forward to seeing you.

Olive Schreiner