News from the early 1870s ...

Olive Schreiner worked as a governess for a number of Boer farming families, a role that grew out of her being sent to visit various family connections and generally help out with their children when her father lost his missionary post and the Schreiner family fell on hard times. This October 1871 letter is one of the earliest extant Schreiner letters, written to her older sister Katie, married to John Findlay. It is also very unlike later Schreiner letters in its ‘letter book’ formality of opening and sign off and rather formulaic content. However, letters to other family members are rather different, suggesting that Schreiner was unfamiliar with the very much older Katie and was being deferential to a sister some seventeen years older than her – or perhaps she was newly embarked as a letter-writer and was still feeling her way. What is typical is Schreiner’s comment in the letter that she “preferred coming to some definite arrangement” with regard to money matters – from a very young age, she was clear that women needed to be financially self-supporting as the basis of solving the ‘woman question’.

Letter Reference
Findlay Family A1199/1067

Archive
William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand

Epistolary Type
Letter

Letter Date
12 October 1871

Address From
Dordrecht, Eastern Cape

Address To
Catherine (‘Katie’) Findlay nee Schreiner

Other Versions
Rive 1987: 4-5

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1: Dordrecht
2: Oct 12th 1871
3:
4: My dearest Katie!
5:
6: I have not heard from you for some time, but I know you must find more
7: than enough to do with your six little ones & can have very
8: little time for letter writing.
9:
10: I am now as see from the date of my letter at Dordrecht, where I shall
11: stay for some time with my friends, the Robinsons. I am teaching their
12: two little girls for which they give me £30 a year, they wished me to
13: live with them just as one of the family but I preferred coming to
14: some definite arrangement. I think it is always best.
15:
16: We are having dreadfully cold weather here, we have had incessant rain
17: & snow for a week, & I don’t know how much longer it is going to last.
18:
19: I am expecting to hear from Tattie tomorrow I suppose she will have
20: returned to Aliwal by this time, I am so anxious to hear what she is
21: going to do now. I don’t fancy she will stay in Aliwal if she can help
22: it poor dear thing. I wish I could spend this afternoon with her.
23: 
24: Don’t forget to give Aunt Olive's love to all the dear little ones;
25: whom I wish I could take a peep at you all. I hope my little Olive is
26: growing nicely as soon as she is old enough do have her likeness taken,
27: & send me one, also those of the other children when you have them
taken. 
29: 
30: I must close now dear sister, do write to me as soon as you can.
31: 
32: I am, with fond love,
33: Your affectate sister
34: Olive A. Schreiner

Notation
Rive's (1987) version omits part of this letter and is also in a number of respects incorrect.

News from the later 1870s...

Schreiner’s 1878 letter to Margaret McNaughton, a young woman she had met earlier while living in a small town called Colesburg on the borders of the Northern and Eastern Cape, starts by apologising for a long gap in writing a promised letter. However, this is quickly followed with a typical Schreiner overture to a possible friend – she had never met anyone she wished to know more! Perhaps having settled into isolated farming life, Schreiner had become newly aware of the need to maintain possible friendships. The letter comments interestingly on Schreiner’s work as a governess on the farm Ganna Hoek, and it contains a wonderful description of that “wild beautiful place” as well as of the Martin or Martain family she was working for. It ends with a comment about Schreiner studying when she was not teaching - but what it fails to mention is that she was actually hard at work writing the works that were later to be known as Undine, The Story of an African Farm, and From Man to Man.

Letter Reference
Olive Schreiner: Miss McNaughton 97.12.3.6.23
Archive National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown
Epistolary Type Letter
Letter Date 24 September 1878
Address From Ganna Hoek, near Cradock, Eastern Cape
Address To Margaret McNaughton
Who To
Other Versions Rive 1987: 18

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Legend
There is a page or pages missing from this letter and it is unclear whether it was ever sent.

1: Ganna Hoek
Sep 24th 1878

My dear Miss McNaughton!

After having six months to pass I feel more than half ashamed to fulfil my promise of writing to you; but in truth I should have done so long ago had I not waited, hoping I should be able to send a likeness when I did write.

I saw so very little of you in Colesburg but I never met with any one whom I so much wished to know more of, & if it had been possible for me to see you oftener, my life in that most miserable of all the stony holes on the face of the earth would have had at least a few pleasant memories connected with it.

I make no doubt that by this time you have left it, so address my letter to Cape Town where I hope it will find you, though I am not sure if I spell your name rightly.

You will see from the date of my letter than that I am now at Ganna Hoek - a farm buried away among the mountains about forty miles distant from Cradock. I have been here ever since I left Colesburg & shall certainly remain for the next six months. & perhaps for unreadable as many years. It is as quiet & out of the way corner of the world as you can well imagine. An English face one never sees & when now & then an old boer puts in an appearance it is quite a momentous event in our little world.

The family consists of the Dutch man & his wife & their three or four children - my pupils - & as they never go into Cradock you may fancy how very quiet & monotonous the life we lead here is. But 'tis a life that I can & do thoroughly enjoy & the six months I have past here have been the most uninterruptedlly happy of my whole life. I feel, & I am sure must look, like another human being & a very different one from the miserable misanthropic life sick old creature as I was when I left that most unblessed of spots.

This is a wild beautiful place. The farm house is perched high up, on the side of one of the mountains & the bush which comes down to the very garden is as unman defiled as one could wish & wild as one can wish I have only to teach for five or six hours a day & all the rest of my time I can spend out of doors, or in my own little room studying. I have plenty of books & if in one way I don't make as much head as I should do is I had ass [page/s missing]

Notation
Rive's (1987) version of this letter has been misdated, omits part of the letter, and is also in a number of respects incorrect.