

'From Man to Man': Olive Schreiner's tender feminist ode

24 Jun 2016 00:00 by: [Jane Rosenthal](#) filed under: [Books](#)



FROM MAN TO MAN OR PERHAPS ONLY

by Olive Schreiner,

edited by Dorothy Driver (UCT Press)

How difficult it is to imagine ourselves back into our grandmothers' lives. For nine decades a first-edition copy of *From Man to Man* has been on our family bookshelves, since it was bought by my grandmother in 1926 from the Times Book Club in London. As she was then living in a small dorp in the northern Orange Free State (as it was then), she must have ordered it by post. She left very few material goods to her sons, but this elegant dark red hardcover was one of them.

On her gravestone is inscribed "Devoted wife and mother", but I have to wonder what she thought of this book, a serious novel on women, in which she wrote her name on two different pages.

Of course it has been reviewed very many times before, so this is to bring this new edition to the notice of readers, especially since it has been out of print for a while.

Olive Schreiner worked on this novel from her late teens, when she was working as a governess on Karoo farms, until just before her death. It was her own favourite of her books, and though incomplete, or incompletely revised by her, it is a mature, visionary and optimistic work.

After her death it was published by her husband, Samuel "Cron" Cronwright-Schreiner. Dorothy Driver has re-edited and annotated it, and written a detailed, erudite, thoughtfully considered preface, which you should read after you have read the novel itself. In this she includes a biographical sketch as well as reflections on previous critiques of *From Man to Man*.

This is a great South African literary treasure restored to us, and an invaluable resource for “Schreiner scholarship”, with much to say about the complex process of writing prose and creating a novel. This is especially found in the appendix, which is an elaborated set of extracts from Schreiner’s letters and journal notes.

I read this book with some enchantment, firstly seduced by the girl child Rebekah, who, on the day her sister Bertie is born, hangs about on the verandah of the Karoo farmhouse, then plays out in the bushes nearby and dreams under a pear tree in the orchard. During the day she finds Bertie’s stillborn twin laid out in the spare bedroom.

The lives of these sisters seemed to me infinitely tragic in entirely different ways and I kept reading to see how they would go on, or end. Rebekah, a reader and thinker from early childhood, marries and, despite her philandering husband, raises four sons in Cape Town. She also has a small room of her own, a study. And she acquires a small farm of her own, which she works with the help of a Malay couple. These are significant assertions of independence.

Bertie, left at home with a self-absorbed mother, is seduced by her tutor and, despite her efforts to escape the gossip and disgrace that follow her, ends up in London as a prostitute. Neither of these sisters fits into white bourgeois colonial society, which is astutely described by Schreiner.

Driver says the novel “is remarkable for its early experimentalism, the power of its storytelling, the vibrancy of its language, and the allegorical imagery that beats like a pulse in its prose”.

Ruth First, in her 1980 biography of Schreiner (co-written with Ann Scott), says: “*From Man to Man* explored the possible relations of women as a sex. Here women were presented as sisters, mothers and wives confronted with the reality of prostitution.”

And Schreiner makes the point, through her story, that in some instances marriage and prostitution are not that different.

Over the four decades in which she worked intermittently on this novel, Schreiner’s thinking on race changed. Driver examines this in her preface and notes the inclusion of black, coloured and Khoisan women as characters with presence and agency. Towards the end of the book Rebekah adopts her domestic servant’s child, a half-sister to her own sons. And in a remarkable bit of early speculative fiction she envisages, in a story she tells her boys, a future in which racism does not exist.

Driver again: “In Schreiner’s writing the real and the ideal continually rub up against each other, creating a set of aporias or moments of undecidability that the text carefully puts in place.” So though she posits a future in which a coloured child of a servant can be part of the family, she also shows the difficulty in that social environment.

Nevertheless, there are descriptions that would be considered offensive today. These include her negatively stereotyped portrait of “the Jew” (never named) who rescues Bertie from misery in Cradock, only to make her life worse in London. Ruth First, herself Jewish, dismisses this as “disappointing”, but it is certainly one of the major flaws of the book.

So, for modern readers, is her use of the word “kaffir” to mean Xhosa – the way it was used then. An earlier critic, Michael Harmel, says Schreiner “would have approved the deletion of that term” as “[n]othing could be

further from her intention than to give offence". But Driver has retained the text as it was, saying: "Better to retain historical terms 'in the sunlight'."

Driver notes that Schreiner lived "in ... poverty not usually associated with white South Africans". Her father was a failed missionary in the sense that he was dismissed from his post for augmenting his salary with private trade. He then took to the road as a smous (hawker), while Lyndall, his wife, moved into "a village outhouse looked after by neighbours". Olive, aged 11, and two siblings were sent to live with an older school teacher brother. Yet it was these parents who instilled in Schreiner her highly developed moral consciousness.

Schreiner was not only an early champion of equality for women, in their personal and public lives, but also a passionate anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist. She did not hesitate to engage, in person, in letters and in public speaking, the powerful people of her day: Cecil John Rhodes, Field Marshal Lord Roberts (commander of the English forces during the South African War) and Jan Smuts.

Although Schreiner longed for a transformed society and put much of her life into achieving this, she was dismayed towards the end of her life at the trend that was developing after the South African War, and especially the Land Act of 1913.

Her aim for this book was to "help other people, it will help to make men more tender to women ... to make some women more tender to others". It will surely do even more than that.