



The Olive Schreiner Letters Project

www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk

Why Olive Schreiner? The feminist and socialist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) was one of the most important – and radical – social commentators of her day. Her published writings include novels (*The Story of An African Farm*, *Undine*, *From Man to Man*), allegories (*Dreams*, *Dream Life and Real Life*, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*), and influential works of social theory (*The Political Situation*, *Closer Union*, *Woman and Labour*, *Thoughts on South Africa*). Around 4800 of Schreiner's letters are extant, with most never having been previously published or discussed. These letters provide an unparalleled source for exploring the unfolding thinking of one of the great feminist theorists and key New Woman writers, and also for examining letter-writing practices in the Schreiner networks over a time-period.

What is the Schreiner Letters Project, who funds it, why are her letters important?

The Olive Schreiner Letters Project is transcribing and analysing all the extant Olive Schreiner letters, located in some 40 major archive collections world-wide, and it contributes theoretically and methodologically to the use of letters and other epistolary materials in social science and humanities research. In January 2012 the Project is also publishing an online edition of Schreiner letters. The Project is funded by the ESRC (RES-062-23-1286) and under its Principal Investigator, Liz Stanley, brings together a research team from the Universities of Edinburgh, Leeds Metropolitan and Sheffield. Schreiner's c4800 letters range from a few hundred words to thirty or forty densely-written pages. Her developing analysis and social theorising in her letters includes such important topics as colonialism under transition, metropolitan feminism and socialism, prostitution, marriage, changing understandings of 'race' and capital, imperialism 'on the ground' in southern Africa, the South African War and its concentration camps and women's relief organisations, international perspectives on women's franchise campaigns, 'race' and labour issues, international feminist networks, the Great War, pacifism and war economies, and political and economic changes in South Africa post WW1. This large body of letters also shows the emergent character of Schreiner's thinking and the over time changing 'definition of the situation' as this was viewed by one of the sharpest-minded social commentators of the age.

What about publication? Digitised fully searchable transcriptions of Schreiner's letters are being published through HRIOnline, which publishes high prestige academic primary source materials. The Schreiner Letters Online provides highly sophisticated search and find tools, which enable and support users world-wide in carrying out their own investigations using this very large body of letters. Publication date is January 2012 at

www.oliveschreiner.org

Why are the Schreiner letters important as a research & teaching resource? A

literary writer who became a renowned social commentator and analyst, a keen traveller with a keen awareness of cultural practices, someone with her eye on how historical events and present-time politics were shaping the future, deeply engaged with the specificities of Africa but in the context of critiquing capitalism and imperialism, Olive Schreiner's letters address topics and issues of concern for present-day academic scholarship in sociology, political science, literary studies, cultural geography, feminist studies, African studies... The Schreiner Letters Online provides a rich source of fully-searchable research materials which can be used for a variety of research and teaching purposes – including for teaching about methodology itself.

The Schreiner Letters Online delivers all the extant Schreiner letters in a fully searchable form using both free-text and Boolean search facilities, and provides a key resource for secondary analysis for researchers and students across the social sciences, humanities and arts. Its transcriptions of Schreiner letters include every insertion and deletion as well as the main text in a readable easily searchable format. The Schreiner Letters Online also provides a raft of sophisticated user research information, including detailed letter Notations concerned with Schreiner's writing, topic collections of key letters on major themes of analytical interest, guides to the archival locations of all her letters, and an 'Essential Schreiner' compendium of must read letters. This editorial apparatus also makes available a wide range of important background information which can be drawn on and helps provide depth to secondary analysis of the letters themselves. The Schreiner Letters Online has been designed with the aim of encouraging and supporting secondary analysis in mind.



What are the key theoretical ideas the Project has developed? The rhetorical and other devices Schreiner draws on in writing her letters, her changing deployment of these over time as she developed her analyses of social events, and the interface between the analysis in her letters and in her published work, are all important for the Project's analytical work.

The epistolarium: The core concept for the Project's work is the concept of 'the epistolarium' with its perspectival, dialogical, emergent, temporal and serial aspects.

The epistolary gift: Building on the idea of the epistolarium, the Project conceptualises letters, and epistolarity more generally, around ideas about 'the gift', seeing most epistolary exchanges as predicated on the continuation and maintenance of relationships around interrupted presence, rather than such exchanges occurring solely or mainly as a solution to absence.

Letterness: In common with much other academic work on letters, the Project is exploring the shifting boundaries of 'letterness' and the porous boundaries between 'the letter' and cognate forms or genres, whilst also recognising that the fundamentals of the letter form are highly resilient.

Epistolary transitional forms and counter-epistolaria: The Project is exploring the development over time in Schreiner's letters of epistolary transition zones and transitional forms, and also a range of counter-epistolaria which trouble but do not break the centrality of the letter.

The purposefulness and performativeness of Schreiner's letters: At basis referential, Schreiner's letters are nearly always purposive and frequently highly performative, with her letters often 'doing things' rather than just commenting about them.

Editorship and the 'translation' of the epistolary form: While the Project strives to make its transcriptions of the Schreiner letters as accurate and 'to the letter' as possible, editorship has to be recognised as a particular kind of activity involving translation and the transmutation of letters from one form to another. It produces something which are less simulacra than transmogrified forms, and it is theorising this.

The inter-relationship of Schreiner's letters with her other 'on the page' and 'off the page' activities: The Project is investigating how Schreiner's letter-writing connects with her 'works', the writing that formed the bedrock of her activities, and with her published writing, her political involvements and activities, and her everyday life and changing modes of living.

Schreiner's epistolary and face-to-face networks and interconnecting epistolariums: Letters are an inherently social and communicative medium of exchange, and Schreiner's very different ways of writing to particular recipients has to be taken into account. These people were also themselves engaged as letter-writers, sometimes to a large array of people, including outwith their connections with Schreiner herself. Such interconnecting networks are being explored as part of the Project.

Where will you find Project publications? For more information about Project ideas and publications, and detailed expositions of the theoretical ideas sketched out above around an array of Schreiner letter examples, please visit the Project website – the web address is below. From the 'Team Publications' live-link, you can download publications on a wide array of our analytical concerns connected with letters, and also with many of the substantive concerns Schreiner wrote about in her letters.

Project team members:

Principal Investigator, Prof Liz Stanley, University of Edinburgh, contact liz.stanley@ed.ac.uk

Co-Investigator, Dr Helen Dampier, Leeds Metropolitan University

Co-Investigator, Prof David Shepherd, University of Keele

Research Associate, Dr Andrea Salter, University of Edinburgh

AHRC PhD Studentship-Holder, Ms Donna Hetherington, University of Edinburgh

ESRC PhD Studentship-Holder, Ms Sarah Poustie, University of Edinburgh

Principal Technical Officer, Dr Michael Meredith, University of Sheffield

Data Developer, Dr Kiera Chapman, University of Sheffield

For more information, please visit the Olive Schreiner Letters Project website now -

www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk

And from January 2012 onwards, please also access her letters themselves at -

www.oliveschreiner.org