

The story of an African crusader

Biography – Olive Schreiner

Author: Olive Schreiner

Olive Schreiner may be widely known and best remembered for her novel *The Story of an African Farm*, but her influence extends so much further than that. While her fight for a racially integrated South Africa may not have come to pass during her time, her activities on behalf of the women's movement led to her being considered one of our country's most important social commentators.

If there is one thing we can learn from Olive Schreiner, it's to never give up or back down. She faced hardship from birth and poor health throughout her lifetime; she was marginalised as a woman and lost a daughter within 16 hours of her birth. But she had strong principles and constantly fought not only her beliefs, but for the greater good of her fellow South Africans.

Born on 24th March 1855 to Gottlob and Rebecca Lyndall Schreiner at the Wittenbergen Mission Station in what was then the South African territory of Basutoland (now the country of Lesotho), she was one of 12 children to be born to Rebecca. Two of Rebecca's sons died in infancy and a third died just before Schreiner's birth. Schreiner carried the names of her three dead brothers: Olive Emilie Albertina Schreiner. Called Emily from birth, at the age of 16 she insisted on being called Olive.

The family was poor and, being missionaries, they moved often during Schreiner's younger years. Her mother was a strict disciplinarian and had no qualms about handing out lashes. One of Schreiner's early memories was of receiving a beating at the age of five, an unfair punishment that she claims triggered her "unutterable bitter rebellion". When Schreiner was nine, her younger sister Ellie died. It devastated Schreiner, who allegedly cradled the corpse for a day and was constantly drawn to the grave to speak to her sister. Years later, she claimed it was the most significant event of her childhood. "My childhood was so very bitter and dark, but I cling to the memories of it and especially the places I lived, they were so unutterably lovely and it was in nature I found all the joy and help I had in those lonely years."

Unable to support his large family after being expelled from the London Missionary Society for supplementing his salary, Gottlob sent 11-year-old Schreiner and her brother Will (9) to live in Cradock with their older brother, Theo, a school headmaster. For the next few years, she boarded with friends and family until the age of 17, when she took on a position as a governess for a family in Dordrecht in the Eastern Cape, where she met Swiss businessman Julius Gau. When the affair ended, she moved back in with Theo, who was by then working in the diamond fields. While Schreiner continued to work as a governess for various families in the Cape until the age of 22, she wrote during her free time, and the bulk of *The Story of an African Farm* was written at the age of 20, while she was working on a remote farm in the Karoo.

These years were lonely for Schreiner – she was based in isolated farming communities – and the pay was poor. But she enjoyed the independence the lifestyle gave her and she refused financial aid from her family. This pride and self-sufficiency guided her throughout her lifetime. "I made up my mind when I was quite a little child that as soon as I was able I would support myself, for I see no reason why a woman should be dependent on her friends any more than a man should," she said in a letter to her sister at the time.

In 1881, Schreiner moved to England in the hope of becoming a nurse, as well as getting her novels published, but chronic asthma soon put paid to her nursing plans and she threw herself into her writing. In 1882, *The Story of an African Farm* was accepted by Chapman and Hall of London, but once again, she experienced the prejudice faced by female authors. The publisher would only take on her work on condition that it was released under the pseudonym Ralph Irons. The novel was widely acclaimed despite its revolutionary feminist views and controversial opinions on marriage and religion. In 1891, when the second edition was published, Schreiner's true identity as the author was finally revealed.

Schreiner's asthma eventually got the better of her and she returned to South Africa in 1889, settling in the Karoo, where her health would benefit from the clean air. Her brother William was by then Attorney General in the Cape Colony government under mining magnate and Prime Minister Cecil John Rhodes. Schreiner initially admired Rhodes, and they became close but ended their relationship in 1892 due to their political and social differences. By this stage, she was delivering speeches criticising British policy in South Africa while also supporting the women's movement and conscientious objectors. In the lead-up to the Anglo-Boer War, Schreiner became even more publicly critical of Britain's imperialism and racism in South Africa, and she was held in detention for over a year during the 1899-1902 war for her outspoken support of the Afrikaner cause and vigorous campaigning against the British role in the war. When she returned home, she found that her house had been looted and her manuscripts burned. She basically had to rewrite *Women and Labour*, which was finally published in 1911.

Schreiner's health continued to deteriorate and her plans to head to Italy for treatment for a heart condition were thwarted by the outbreak of WW1, causing her to divert to England where she stayed for the duration of the war. She finally returned to South Africa in 1920 knowing that her life was nearing its end. But as she once said, "I think if I were dying and I heard of an act of injustice, it would start me up to a moment's life again." In true form, despite her ill health, she continued her crusade until her death, raising money for striking Africans and assisting with campaigns protesting the issuing of internal passbooks. She suffered a fatal heart attack on 11th December 1920, alone again in a boarding house. Her remains were entombed with those of her daughter and her dog, as per her wishes, in a rock outcrop at Buffels Hoek, which overlooks the Karoo desert. Although her voice was stilled before her work was complete, it was one of the most important voices of the time.

Smart Words by a smart woman

My feeling is that there is nothing in life but refraining from hurting others, and comforting those who are sad.

Our fathers had their dreams; we have ours; the generation that follows will have its own. Without dreams and phantoms, man cannot exist.

We were equals once when we lay newborn babes on our nurse's knees. We will be equal again when they tie up our jaws for the last sleep.

Everything has two sides - the outside that is ridiculous, and the inside that is solemn.

Men are like the earth and we are the moon; we turn always one side to them, and they think there is no other, because they don't see it - but there is.

The brain works better if the hand works too.

The secret of success is concentration ... Taste everything a little, look at everything a little; but live for one thing.