

SCHREINER HOUSE

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There are several remarkable ways in which the Schreiner House project - an initiative of a museum concerned with South African literature in English - spills over into the concerns of environmental education with application equally to the urban and the natural environment. This article focuses on the role played by Schreiner House in the conservation of this country's architectural heritage; explores the manner in which the House contributes to providing a social record of the late nineteenth century, and - perhaps most significantly - examines how, through highlighting the writing of Olive Schreiner, the House indirectly demonstrates the living link imaginative literature can provide with the environment.

INTRODUCTION

On 7 November 1986 an unusual project reached completion when Schreiner House at 9 Cross Street, Cradock, was handed over to the National English Literary Museum (NELM), Grahamstown. The project is unusual, for although it is not a novel idea to commemorate famous authors and illustrate their domestic environments by preserving their homes, this is the first instance of such a project on national museum level for a South African English writer. The project was made possible by a donation of R40 000 from AA Mutual Life and through the generous assistance of the Cradock Town Council and Municipality. The House will serve as a gallery devoted primarily to South Africa's first great English writer, Olive Schreiner.

There are several remarkable ways in which the Schreiner House project - an initiative of a museum concerned with South African literature in English - spills over into the concerns of environmental education with application equally to the urban and the natural environment. I should like to draw attention to some of these during the course of this article. In doing so, I will focus on the role played by Schreiner House in the conservation of this country's architectural heritage; explore the manner in which the House contributes to providing a social record of the late nineteenth century; and, perhaps most significantly, examine the way in which, through highlighting the writing of Olive Schreiner, the House indirectly demonstrates the living link imaginative literature can provide with the environment.

ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

The house in Cross Street, apart from having once been the home of Olive Schreiner, also possesses architectural merit, especially in its restored state. Yet, in 1983, the centenary of the publication of Schreiner's best-known novel *The Story of an African Farm*, the house was for sale and in danger of demolition. Without its association with Schreiner, the historical value of the house would have been overlooked and an important feature of the urban environment lost forever.



FIGURE 1

Schreiner House before and after restoration.



All photographs in this article are by Basil Mills

Olive Schreiner came to Cradock in 1867 when she was twelve, in the wake of the collapse of her parental home after her father's insolvency. Her brother Theo (23 in 1867), headmaster of the local public school, was head of the little household, with their sister Ettie (17) as housekeeper. In the following year their younger brother Will, then eleven, joined them. The four remained together until 1870 when Theo and Will went to seek their fortune at the newly discovered diamond fields. Ettie stayed in Cradock to run a small school. Olive, at the age of fifteen, left to become a governess with the Orpen family in Barkly East.



FIGURE 2 Olive Schreiner at 14 years of age during the time she was living in Cradock.

Olive appears to have started writing two stories while she lived in Cradock (called 'Rain' and 'Diamonds'), but not surprisingly no record from this period survives to bear witness to her emergent creative genius. Nevertheless, it was in Cradock that her religious and philosophical convictions were given form, and in Cradock where she made friendships which were to play a role in directing her activities for the next eleven years. She returned to the district in 1875 and while moving from one post of governess to another she continued with her writing.

AA Mutual Life became interested in the house at 9 Cross Street through Ms Lucille Gillwald who in 1983 directed Stephen Gray's play *Schreiner*. The production won one of the quarterly VITA Awards sponsored and administered by the company. At the celebratory luncheon, Ms Gillwald drew attention to the existence and uncertain future of Olive Schreiner's former home which she had visited during the course of her research. The company took the initiative and with active support from the National English Literary Museum and the Cradock Town Council and Municipality, acquired the house and began the restoration work.

The reconstruction was undertaken by the Cradock Town Engineer's Department along lines determined by the architect, Professor Dennis Radford, of the University of the Witwatersrand. His aim was to restore the house in form and content as closely as possible to

the state in which Olive would have known it. This involved a considerable amount of detective work, for the house had been substantially altered over the intervening years: for instance, no original wooden windows or doors remained, floors were concrete and the fireplaces had been removed. Only the shell of the house remained to give some clue to the original appearance and even here, only certain later changes were obvious, such as the precast concrete verandah which was added sometime during the 1930s. Other additions to the original core of the house were discerned by carefully examining the various roof coverings.

The problem of authentic restoration was exacerbated by the fact that no old photographs or sketches of the house could be traced. It became clear that restoration by anastylosis would be the only viable method that could be employed. Professor Radford describes this process in the following way:

"What this means, broadly speaking, is that the original c.1870 appearance of the house was reconstructed by closely examining a broad range of existing old houses in Cradock and by perusing all relevant visual material, such as sketches and photographs of the period. From this a pattern was abstracted, and on the shell of the existing building a series of 'typical' solutions were imposed to give it a definite form."

(Radford, 1987, pp.8-9).

The house as it is now is an example of a typical nineteenth-century Karoo townhouse and allows a fairly good picture of the domestic architecture of that period. This is of significance as it is one of the oldest dwellings still standing in Cradock, others having been destroyed in the floods during the 1970s. (It seems from the title deeds that the original core of the house was built sometime between 1847 and 1852).



FIGURE 3 Olive Schreiner at the time of the publication of *The Story of an African Farm*.

Clearly, Schreiner House, preserved essentially for its literary connection, can be perceived as also having a role in environmental education with specific reference to the architectural heritage within the urban landscape.

SOCIAL RECORD

Structural and archaeological evidence made it possible to ascertain the form of the house in the late 1860s. The information that was gained from an examination of the plan and spaces of the house contributes substantially to an understanding of the layout of a typical late nineteenth-century middle class home in Cradock. It consisted of five main rooms: the original three (which probably consisted of a bedroom, lounge and kitchen) onto which a diningroom and 'stoepkamer' had been added.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, no surviving documentation as to how the house was used during the Schreiners' residence could be traced and determining which room Olive Schreiner used as a bedroom is one of the still unsolved problems. Dr. Radford has proposed that she may have used the 'stoepkamer', but there seems to be no way of proving this.

During the restoration process, care was taken to maintain an authentic colour scheme and other details. For instance, although turquoise-blue may strike a present-day visitor as an unusual choice for walls in a kitchen, it was widely used at the time in the belief that it would serve as a deterrent to flies. In the kitchen, reflecting the custom of that time, the old 'misvloer' has been relaid.

A visit to the back area of Schreiner House reveals a traditional small townhouse garden of c.1870. These gardens were of necessity very utilitarian but not without charm. As one might expect, most of the planting concerned itself with the growing of useful fruit-bearing trees and herbs. An impressive feature of the garden is the original cistern into which rainwater from the roof was led. It is likely that its purpose in the semi-arid Karoo climate was to conserve a good supply of drinking water for the inhabitants of 9 Cross Street.

The restored house has been semi-furnished with items from the relevant period.

ENVIRONMENT IN IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE

There are many different ways of observing and interpreting the environment, as the work of naturalists, historians, archaeologists, geologists and painters, to name only a few, has demonstrated. Schreiner House in Cradock, a symbolic centre for the commemoration of Olive Schreiner as a writer and woman of great insight and influence, indirectly draws attention to the perception of the environment as presented by the writer of imaginative literature. This perception is a peculiarly complex one. As I see it, although essentially a creation of the imagination, the writing is at once a record of the individual author's memory and of the age in which he or she lived as well as a view of the particular environment being described. Another consideration to be borne in mind is that such writing will seldom be intended as a physical description only. More usually, this description will be suffused with instructional, polemical and/or symbolic intent.

FIGURE 4

A view from the summit of Buffelskop, looking nearly north. The photograph was taken by Olive Schreiner's husband on the day of her re-interment in 1921.



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In the oldest part of the house a panel has been left to show visitors the composition and method of construction of the walls during the mid-nineteenth century. At that time cement was imported, expensive and therefore usually used only for plastering externally. An examination of the panel area shows that soft sun-dried brick set in mud mortar was used. Unlike the more sophisticated but less flexible building methods of the late twentieth century, this form of construction has the advantage of allowing the building to move with the effects of seasonal changes without cracking.

Nonetheless, I propose than an author's perception permeates our view of the environment in that we as readers are all knowingly or unknowingly influenced by these 'descriptions' and many of us gain enormous pleasure from, for instance, associating places with scenes featuring in fiction or poetry. In some instances, details gleaned in this way may form the only impression we have of a particular place at a particular time - no matter that this impression may be at variance with the information available from a less subjective source.

Schreiner's novels are of particular interest in the last-mentioned connection, for as a writer born and bred in Southern Africa, she was concerned to establish solidly the physical presence of the indigenous environment in her writing. In this preoccupation her work may be seen to herald the dawn of a new consciousness in imaginative writing about sub-Saharan Africa. This is most apparent in her highly acclaimed novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), during the course of which she explodes stock Victorian images and accompanying prejudices about 'Africa'. That this was Schreiner's conscious intention is evident from the preface to the second edition of her book where she states:

"It has been suggested by a kind critic that he would better have liked the little book if it had been a history of wild adventure; of cattle driven into inaccessible 'krantzes' by Bushmen; 'of encounters with ravening lions, and hair-breadth escapes'. This could not be. Such works are best written in Piccadilly or in the Strand: there the gifts of the creative imagination untrammelled by contact with any fact, may spread their wings.

But, should one sit down to paint the scenes among which he has grown, he will find that the facts creep in upon him. Those brilliant phases and shapes which the imagination sees in far-off lands are not for him to portray. Sadly he must squeeze the colour from his brush, and dip it into the grey pigments around him. He must paint what lies before him."

(Schreiner, 1986, pp.23-24).

Successive generations of South African writers working in English have followed Schreiner's imperative to use what lies before them as the stuff of their imagination. The time is surely long overdue for incorporating these views into the stuff of environmental education.

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Notes:

- * Olive's ties with Cradock were strengthened in 1892 when she met Samuel Cronwright, then farming on Krantzplaas and later, in 1894, married him. Her attachment to the district is apparent in her wish to be buried in Buffelskop, south of Cradock, where in 1921 she was re-interred.
- * An exhibition titled *Olive Schreiner: A Personal Album*, mounted by NELM and using photographs from their Collection, is on display at Schreiner House. Commemorative envelopes and postcards of Schreiner are also available.
- * A visit to Schreiner House at 9 Cross Street, Cradock can be arranged by contacting the Curator, Mrs. Paddy Orpen on (0481) 5251. The House is open during business hours on weekdays, excluding public holidays.
- * Further enquiries about South African literature in English should be addressed to The Director, National English Literary Museum, Private Bag 1019, Grahamstown 6140. Telephone (0461)27095/27042.

FIGURE 5

Ms Lucille Gilwald, Director of the award-winning play *Schreiner*, in front of the exhibition 'Olive Schreiner: A Personal Album' currently on display at Schreiner House.

