

# OLIVE SCHREINER AND THE WOMEN'S VOTE<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to contribute some thoughts which may help to shed light on the faithful following Olive Schreiner had in the Cape. In doing so I have drawn on research on the life of Mary Fitzgerald, a contemporary of Olive Schreiner. My interest is in the demand by women for the vote, and the breach over the terms that arose between the Cape suffrage society and the societies in the other colonies, prior to the Act of Union in May 1910.

The Cape enfranchisement society, of which Olive Schreiner was a member, refused to compromise its demand for a non-racial suffrage. For many years to come a few women (among them Ruth Schechter) were at pains to point out that the colonies outside the Cape were discriminating against all other women in their demand for the white women's vote.

On the surface the terms on which women demanded the vote appeared simple, but were in reality complex. They were determined by the class composition of the suffrage societies and the political views of the member's husbands. In the Cape, liberals had argued for a qualified non-racial suffrage: that is, the vote for African men, with requisite property and educational qualifications. Yet in doing this they argued that the franchise should be extended horizontally and not vertically. They would grant only the possibility of white women being enfranchised. In this they were explicit: 'We cannot at our peril lower the qualifications for the franchise below its present level . . .'

There was disagreement among the political parties and groupings at the time on the question of the women's vote, but few of them gave it any support.<sup>2</sup> To make themselves heard at all, the suffrage leagues had to find political support in societies where both they and the black population were disenfranchised. That is, outside the sphere of political decision making. This was to be reflected in the dispute inside the suffrage societies over the wording of their demands.

## *A Background to Women's Demands*

Boer women had grouped together in 1891 in Natal to present their demand for the right to vote, and it was only in 1907 that Cape women formed the Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL). Shortly thereafter a similar League was formed in Johannesburg. The Cape group had forty members and Olive Schreiner was its vice-president. In the same year a bill was brought before the Cape parliament, seconded by Olive's hus-

band, Cronwright Schreiner. However, it failed to secure enough support to make it law.

One of the persons recruited in by the Johannesburg WEL was Mary Fitzgerald. Employed as secretary of the Transvaal Miner's Association, she was shaken by the death of miners who inhaled the white sand that filled the gold mines following the drilling and blasting of rocks. She became a prominent labour leader whose militant, if unorthodox, methods earned her the name 'Pickhandle Mary'. From 1907-12 she edited the *Voice of Labour*, a paper that leaned towards syndicalism, and she was in contact with the Cape Social Democratic Federation. The *Voice of Labour* reflected her interest in local and national meetings and functions.

Fitzgerald must have had some influence in the Johannesburg WEL's decision to enrol working class women. It was also decided to model the Johannesburg WEL on the model of the British suffrage societies. In line with this it decided that 'parliamentary suffrage should be demanded on the same terms as men'.

The Johannesburg group made attempts to expand membership by holding drawing-room meetings to which shop assistants were invited. Papers were written to educate women about their rights, or lack of them. Posters and pamphlets were printed and placed in trams. Libraries were asked to accept propaganda on women's suffrage. They attempted to gain official recognition by inviting prominent women to become honorary members of the League. Most declined and even declared their opposition to the vote for women.

### *The Colour Question and the Vote*

The membership card of the WEL in Johannesburg called for 'full political and constitutional rights for women in South Africa' but avoided mention of the colour issue in so doing. Indeed at a public meeting on 5 March 1909 the matter had been decided. A resolution passed by more than 200 who attended read: 'the time now had come for women to be granted full constitutional rights in a united South Africa . . . therefore the franchise provisions of the Draft Act [of Union] were unsatisfactory seeing that the franchise was secured to the Cape Natives and not to white women. Some protective clause should be embodied in the Draft Act ensuring no further extension of the Native franchise should be granted before [white] women were in a position to make their wishes felt at the polls.'

Three members of the League, Nina Boyle (the president), Margaret C Bruce, and Mary Fitzgerald published the first issue of a monthly journal, *Modern Women in South Africa*, in November 1909.<sup>3</sup> In the first issue they complained that the press treated their campaign 'in repeated instances of misrepresentation'. A successful meeting, it said, was described as having 'been a fiasco and a scene of ribald interruption'.

Mary Fitzgerald also used the pages of the *Voice of Labour* to advance the cause of the League's campaign. There she said that the demand that the vote be on the same terms as that of men was flawed. The small property qualification

inflicts no appreciable hardship on the working man, but owing to the economic dependence of married working women, it is entirely inapplicable to the majority of them'.

Only the broadest measure possible to give working women, married and single, the vote was acceptable.<sup>4</sup> But all this was said with respect to white women alone. She cautioned that a demand for the vote for all women would lead to rejection by the segregationist Labour Party.

The gap between the Leagues of the Cape and elsewhere widened. In March 1909 the minutes of the Johannesburg WEL stated that the Cape League was unable to support the draft Bill, which claimed the vote for women on the same terms as men because this restricted the issue to whites outside the Cape. Two months later the Cape League wrote to the National Committee of Enfranchisement Leagues announcing its intention to secede, as their constitutions were incompatible.

It was at this stage that Olive Schreiner resigned from the Cape WEL, obviously unhappy with the position inside the South African suffragette movement. Across a leaflet setting out the aims of the Cape WEL she wrote that she was resigning because her demand was for all the women of the Cape, not just the whites.

The position in the three northern colonies was clear. They were not prepared to extend their demand for the vote to include Coloureds or Africans. The matter was not altered by the visit in 1911 of two women from abroad to assist the work of the Leagues. One of them, Carrie Chapman-Catt, had a record of relentless lobbying for the women's vote in the USA. In South Africa she advised the women to stay clear of any race issues which would delay their getting the vote. With her encouragement the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union of South Africa (WEAU) was launched. It worked only for the extension of the vote to white women. The Cape WEL refused to join the new federal body.<sup>5</sup>

In 1930 the vote was finally extended to the white women of South Africa, effectively diminishing the value of the restricted black vote. It was to the WEAU that Cronwright Schreiner wrote in 1930. The text was printed in the victory issue of the body's journal *Flashlight*.<sup>6</sup> In this he said that 'Olive Schreiner would not have looked upon that Act as victory but publicly and emphatically would have disassociated herself from any part in such "Victory celebrations"'. He continued:

she would have condemned it, as she always condemned any legislation which tended to disenfranchisement on sex or race lines. This being the case I trust you will not in any way associate her name with the victory celebration.

## References

1. A response to the article on Ruth Schechter, friend to Olive Schreiner by Baruch Hirson n *Searchlight South Africa*, No 9.
2. John X Merriman, liberal leader in the Cape, said that if 'in any country in the world it is a necessity that franchise be kept on a masculine basis that is South Africa'. General Botha, first prime minister of the Union of South Africa, told a delegation of women in 1913 that he was in favour of their enfranchisement and added, that 'the pressing problem of the day was the Native Question', and he felt that it was 'only with the help of the women that the solution of the problem could be found'. He said further that much water would have to flow under the bridge before the vote for women could enter the sphere of practical politics.
3. I have only found the first issue of this journal. With a membership of less than 300 by 1911, the journal had little prospect of survival.
4. In this Mary Fitzgerald was supporting the demand of the Women's Co-operative Guild in Britain, which had a membership comprising mainly working married women.
5. *Star*, 15 October 1911.
6. July 1930.

## Bibliography

- The Minutes of the Johannesburg Women's Enfranchisement League, 1910-12, Johannesburg Municipal Library
- Annual reports and correspondence of the Johannesburg Women's Enfranchisement League, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Irene M Ashby Macfadyen (President of the Women's Enfranchisement League, Cape), *The Cape Parliament and the Enfranchisement of Women, 1900-1909*.
- Cheryl Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*, University of Cape Town Honours thesis, 1979. Published as a monograph

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Editor's note: Lou Haysom has written a biography of Mary Fitzgeralds, which has not been published. The only other account of Fitzgerald's activities, published to date, is in R K Cope's *Comrade Bill* (c 1944). There will also be a brief discussion of Fitzgerald in B Hirson and Gwyn Williams, *The Delegate for Africa, the Life and Times of David Ivon Jones*, forthcoming.

Mary Fitzgerald became interested in labour problems when she worked as a clerk in the South African Mine Workers Union in Johannesburg. She was appalled at the incidence of phthisis among the miners and their early deaths within eight years of commencing work. In taking up their cause she became increasingly involved in the labour movement. In 1907 she worked closely with Archie Crawford and was the editor of *Voice of Labour*. Both Fitzgerald and Crawford (whom she was to marry), could be described before the war as militant syndicalists. However, caught in the patriotic fervour of the First World War they ended as right-wing labourites.

Fitzgerald gained the name 'Pickhandle Mary' when she picked up the iron clad stave (or pickhandle) accidentally dropped by mounted police and used by them to break up meetings and demonstrations. Wielding her 'weapon' she turned on the police and routed them. Armed with pickhandles, Mary and her followers were subsequently to be seen at demonstrations and meetings defending the platform or routing their enemies.