by JILL ARNOTT

VARIATIONS ON ORTHODOXY

A review of OLIVE SCHREINER AND AFTER: ESSAYS ON SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE IN HONOUR OF GUY BUTLER; van Wyk Smith and Maclennan (Eds.). David Philip, Cape Town, 1983.

One of the dangers implicit in assembling a number of essays with the aim of pleasing or honouring a specific person – in this case Professor Guy Butler – is that the tastes and preferences of that person may limit the scope of the collection in terms of both content and approach. A preliminary glance at the first section of this book, that devoted to the work of Olive Schreiner, suggested that this had not happened and that an interesting variety of critical methods were, in fact, represented. Closer examination, however, revealed that departures from liberal-humanist orthodoxy almost invariably mark the offerings of contributors from overseas, while the South African participants, separated out, do reveal a somewhat depressing homogeneity as regards the critical values and assumptions underlying their articles.

Nadine Gordimer in her review of Ruth First and Ann Scott's **Olive Schreiner: A Biography** makes her position plain through her claim that she is concerned with Schreiner "exclusively as an imaginative writer . . . (who) dissipated her imaginative creativity . . . in writing tracts and pamphlets rather than fiction". (p. 18) She denies that this is "to discount her social and political mission in the claims of formalist symmetries and aesthetic hoverings" (p.18), but it is clear that for her the locus of value in Schreiner's work is aesthetic before ever it is political or ideological. Alan Paton follows this line when he complains of **Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland** that "the weakest parts of the novel are the didactic parts" (p. 33). This may well be a sound judgement, but it fails to take into account the fact that in **Trooper Peter Halket** Schreiner was not, as Arthur Ravenscroft argues in his lucid and well-reasoned essay, [2]"trying to produce a work of fictional art, but making a passionate statement of political principle, using the fictional mode, not to create fiction, but, quite as legitimately, for purposes of analysis, judgement and suasion". (p. 48) From this point of view it is invalid to condemn 'the didactic parts' of the novel as 'weak' because they fail to meet certain standards of purely literary excellence.

Cover illustration **Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland** *(Africana Library).*

Ridley Beaton's essay, "Olive Schreiner's Fiction Revisited" could stand as a paradigm, if not a parody, of the liberal-humanist position, combining as it does a belief that the task of fiction is to convey the immediacy of 'lived' experience, a New-Critical concern with formal unity and 'organicism', and a positively reverential regard for the imagination as an autonomous creative faculty. He opens his essay by drawing the classic distinction between "art" and "propaganda" (p. 35), and goes on to state that Olive Schreiner's two 'lesser' novels may be so designated because of their relative lack of "imaginative vision" (p. 37), while **The Story of An African Farm** is praised for its "organic unity" (p. 37), (the word 'organic' is used three times in as many pages), and, bafflingly, for "glorifying the mystery by our dedication to the most intense forms of life we can know". This is a characteristically incomprehensible example of the tendency of this type of criticism to rely more upon awe-inspiring vagueness than upon accuracy of research or cogency of argument.

NOT TACKLED

All this is not to deny the right of these critics to follow whatever critical paths they choose, but it is undeniable that their consensus has led to a noticeable lacuna in this particular collection. One of the most fascinating aspects of Olive Schreiner's work must surely be what that work reveals about her own relation to her Colonial context, and the relation of her fictional texts to the unusual set of social, economic and ideological factors which determined them. Yet no essay in this collection makes any real attempt to tackle this topic.

Cherry Clayton[3] comments that "as an English-speaking colonial and the child of a missionary, she (Schreiner) understood the two great expansionist movements of Europe in the nineteenth century, Evangelicism and Imperialism, as spiritual and material annexations of another country" (p. 20) and goes on to link this with Schreiner's concern with questions of power and dependence. It is a perceptive remark and suggests that Ms Clayton may be about to embark on the sort of analysis that the collection so conspicuously lacks. But despite offering several valuable insights, she moves away from an analysis of the determining influence of context towards one of form and her essay is in the main concerned with the structural aspects of **African Farm**; what she calls "the freedom and control of imaginative power". (p. 29)

Rodney Davenport[4] does provide a valuable account of the development of Olive Schreiner's political thought, but confines his commentary to her non-fiction (with the exception of **Trooper Peter Halket)** and once again the crucial relationship between fiction and ideology remains unexplored.

At this point what seems to be at issue is the reason behind the choice of these particular critics as contributors to this volume. Were they chosen because they are personal friends of Professor Butler? Because the positions they adopt are likely to be more acceptable to him? Or because they are considered to be the best, if not the only, critics in this particular field? If the last, one can assume that the exponents of materialist criticism in this country are either sadly few, or sadly undervalued. It is, of course, possible that some such critics may have been invited to contribute but declined because they felt that their particular critical approach might not be welcome to Professor Butler.

The second aspect of Schreiner's work which is generally conceded to be of considerable interest is her status as a feminist writer. This is dealt with, but merits only one essay.[5] which, though shrewd and informative, is negative in its evaluation and occasionally patronising in its effect. Lerner's assessment of the limitations and shortcomings of Schreiner's feminism in **African Farm** is thought-provoking but one-sided, largely ignoring the positive aspects of her achievement: her pioneering attempts to demolish sexist stereotypes and the courage with which she depicted a heroine who was both a feminist and a sexual rebel, at a time when the women's movement as a whole was publicly endorsing Victorian sexual mores for fear of alienating potential supporters of their campaign for economic and political emancipation

HETEROGENEITY

If the first section of the book suffers from too great a homogeneity of approach, the second could be said to be notable for the heterogeneity of its content. The impact of this section is perhaps lessened by the random nature of the topics presented: chosen, it would seem, in accordance with no organising principle besides that of the personal interests of individual contributors. However, this does give it something of the character of a lucky-dip, and there are several treasures to be brought to light. Space does not allow for much in the way of comment on specific essays, although the meticulous research behind A.E. Voss's "The Hero of **The Native Races:** The Making of a Myth" deserves recognition, as does Bernth Lindfors's "Charles Dickens and the Zulus", a devastating exposé of racial prejudice in the most 'liberal' of novelists, but also a horrifying reminder of the capacity for survival of racial myths. My over-all response to the second section of this volume was one of interest and approval, but also of disquiet over the fact that only two of the eight essays were written by resident South Africans and the question this raises regarding the status of South African literature in South African schools and universities.

The predominance of negative criticism in this review will not, I hope, suggest that this volume is not to be welcomed. With such a shortage of critical material on South African writing, any intelligent and informed contributions in this field can only be received with gratitude. But two factors continue to disturb me: firstly, that any collection of essays can reflect so clearly the dominance of any one critical method, and secondly, that Colin Gardner's [6] is the only essay to concern itself with, or even acknowledge the existence of, Black writing. Anyone unacquainted with South African writing, and approaching it for the first time through the medium of this book, could be forgiven for concluding that the literature of this country is largely produced and exclusively criticised by Whites. □

2. Ravenscroft, Arthur. "Literature and Politics: Two Zimbabwean Novels", p.p. 46-57.
3. Clayton, Cherry. "Forms of Dependence and Control in Olive Schreiner's Fiction", pp. 20-29.
4. Davenport, Rodney. "Olive Schreiner and South African Politics", pp. 93-107.
5. Lerner, Laurence. "Olive Schreiner and the Feminists", pp. 67-79.
6. Gardner, Colin. "A Poem About Revolution", pp. 184-195.