

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-05304-4 - Woman and Labour
Olive Schreiner
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-05304-4 - Woman and Labour
Olive Schreiner
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

IT is necessary to say a few words to explain this book. The original title of the book was “Musings on Woman and Labour.”

It is, what its name implies, a collection of musings on some of the points connected with woman's work.

In my early youth I began a book on Woman. I continued the work till ten years ago. It necessarily touched on most matters in which sex has a part, however incompletely.

It began by tracing the differences of sex function to their earliest appearances in life on the globe; not only as when in the animal world, two amoeboid globules coalesce, and the process of sexual generation almost unconsciously begins; but to its yet more primitive manifestations in plant life. In the first three chapters I traced, as far as I was able, the evolution of sex in different branches of non-human life. Many large facts surprised me in following this line of thought by their bearing on the whole modern

Woman and Labour

sex problem. Such facts as this ; that, in the great majority of species on the earth the female form exceeds the male in size and strength and often in predatory instinct ; and that sex relationships may assume almost any form on earth as the conditions of life vary ; and that, even in their sexual relations towards offspring, those differences which we, conventionally, are apt to suppose are inherent in the paternal or the maternal sex form, are not inherent—as when one studies the lives of certain toads, where the female deposits her eggs in cavities on the back of the male, where the eggs are preserved and hatched ; or, of certain sea animals, in which the male carries the young about with him and rears them in a pouch formed of his own substance ; and countless other such. And above all, this important fact, which had first impressed me when as a child I wandered alone in the African bush and watched cock-o-veets singing their inter-knit love-songs, and small singing birds building their nests together, and caring for and watching over, not only their young, but each other, and which has powerfully influenced all I have thought and felt on sex matters since ;—the fact that, along the line of bird life and among certain of its species sex has attained its highest and æsthetic, and one might almost say intellectual,

Introduction

development on earth : a point of development to which no human race as a whole has yet reached, and which represents the realisation of the highest sexual ideal which haunts humanity.

When these three chapters were ended I went on to deal, as far as possible, with woman's condition in the most primitive, in the savage and in the semi-savage states. I had always been strangely interested from childhood in watching the condition of the native African women in their primitive society about me. When I was eighteen I had a conversation with a Kafir woman still in her untouched primitive condition, a conversation which made a more profound impression on my mind than any but one other incident connected with the position of woman has ever done. She was a woman whom I cannot think of otherwise than as a person of genius. In language more eloquent and intense than I have ever heard from the lips of any other woman, she painted the condition of the women of her race; the labour of women, the anguish of woman as she grew older, and the limitations of her life closed in about her, her sufferings under the condition of polygamy and subjection; all this she painted with a passion and intensity I have not known equalled; and

Woman and Labour

yet, and this was the interesting point, when I went on to question her, combined with a deep and almost fierce bitterness against life and the unseen powers which had shaped woman and her conditions as they were, there was not one word of bitterness against the individual man, nor any will or intention to revolt; rather, there was a stern and almost majestic attitude of acceptance of the inevitable; life and the conditions of her race being what they were. It was this conversation which first forced upon me a truth, which I have since come to regard as almost axiomatic, that, the women of no race or class will ever rise in revolt or attempt to bring about a revolutionary readjustment of their relation to their society, however intense their suffering and however clear their perception of it, while the welfare and persistence of their society requires their submission: that, wherever there is a general attempt on the part of the women of any society to readjust their position in it, a close analysis will always show that the changed or changing conditions of that society have made woman's acquiescence no longer necessary or desirable.

Another point which it was attempted to deal with in this division of the book was the

Introduction

probability, amounting almost to a certainty, that woman's physical suffering and weakness in child-birth and certain other directions was the price which woman has been compelled to pay for the passing of the race from the quadrupedal and four-handed state to the erect; and which was essential if humanity as we know it was to exist (this of course was dealt with by a physiological study of woman's structure); and also, to deal with the highly probable, though unproved and perhaps unprovable, suggestion, that it was largely the necessity which woman was under of bearing her helpless young in her arms while procuring food for them and herself, and of carrying them when escaping from enemies, that led to the entirely erect position being forced on developing humanity.

These and many other points throwing an interesting light on the later development of women (such as the relation between agriculture and the subjection of women) were gone into in this division of the book dealing with primitive and semi-barbarous womanhood.

When this division was ended, I had them typewritten, and with the first three chapters bound in one volume about the year 1888; and then went

Woman and Labour

on to work at the last division, which I had already begun.

This dealt with what is more popularly known as the women's question : with the causes which in modern European societies are leading women to attempt readjustment in their relation to their social organism ; with the direction in which such readjustments are taking place ; and with the results which in the future it appears likely such readjustments will produce.

After eleven years, 1899, these chapters were finished and bound in a large volume with the first two divisions. There then only remained to revise the book and write a preface. In addition to the prose argument I had in each chapter one or more allegories ; because while it is easy clearly to express abstract thoughts in argumentative prose, whatever emotion those thoughts awaken I have not felt myself able adequately to express except in the other form.¹ I had also tried throughout to illustrate the subject with exactly those particular facts in the animal and human

¹ The allegory "Three Dreams in a Desert" which I published about nineteen years ago was taken from this book ; and I have felt that perhaps being taken from its context it was not quite clear to every one.

Introduction

world, with which I had come into personal contact and which had helped to form the conclusions which were given ; as it has always seemed to me that in dealing with sociological questions a knowledge of the exact manner in which any writer has arrived at his view is necessary in measuring its worth. The work had occupied a large part of my life, and I had hoped, whatever its deficiencies, that it might at least stimulate other minds, perhaps more happily situated, to an enlarged study of the question.

In 1899 I was living in Johannesburg, when, owing to ill-health, I was ordered suddenly to spend some time at a lower level. At the end of two months the Boer War broke out. Two days after war was proclaimed I arrived at De Aar on my way back to the Transvaal ; but Martial Law had already been proclaimed there, and the military authorities refused to allow my return to my home in Johannesburg and sent me to the Colony ; nor was I allowed to send any communication through, to any person, who might have extended some care over my possessions. Some eight months after, when the British troops had taken and entered Johannesburg ; a friend, who, being on the British side, had been

Woman and Labour

allowed to go up, wrote me that he had visited my house and found it looted, that all that was of value had been taken or destroyed ; that my desk had been forced open and broken up, and its contents set on fire in the centre of the room, so that the roof was blackened over the pile of burnt papers. He added that there was little in the remnants of paper of which I could make any use, but that he had gathered and stored the fragments till such time as I might be allowed to come and see them. I thus knew my book had been destroyed.

Some months later in the war when confined in a little up-country hamlet, many hundreds of miles from the coast and from Johannesburg ; with the brunt of the war at that time breaking around us, de Wet having crossed the Orange River and being said to have been within a few miles of us, and the British columns moving hither and thither, I was living in a little house on the outskirts of the village, in a single room, with a stretcher and two packing-cases as furniture, and with my little dog for company. Thirty-six armed African natives were set to guard night and day at the doors and windows of the house ; and I was only allowed to go out during certain hours in the middle of the