

# The Koodoo on our Kar(r)oo: Reclaiming and Editing our Literary Heritage

**Stephen Gray**

## Summary

With the celebration in 2008 of the 125th anniversary of the first publication of Olive Schreiner's novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, in 1873, the question of reliability of the text came up once again for review. This article accounts for the circumstances of the first printing in London with an inexperienced author as proofreader, without any existing standardisation or other lexical references to non-British usages particularly proto-Afrikaans, to consult, and the prevailing London publishing norms in control. Subsequent editions with numerous corrections by her hand, as well as by later editors, are mentioned, while the quest to establish a definitive edition is outlined, now that English South African usages incorporate many fringe language examples which have since become nativised into common usage. The article suggests that lax proofreading, on the one hand, together with scantily informed metropolitan standards of language outreach, on the other, have led to unfortunate errors being perpetuated, even in numerous scholarly spin-offs, despite the attempts of previous scholars to standardise the text to conform to present-day professional norms and conventions.

## Opsomming

Olive Schreiner se roman, *The Story of an African Farm*, is die eerste keer in 1873 gepubliseer. Die 125ste herdenking van die publikasiedatum is in 2008 gevier, en terselfdertyd is die vraag oor die betroubaarheid van die teks weer geopper. Hierdie artikel doen verslag oor die omstandighede en gebruike wat ten tyde van die roman se publikasie in die Londense uitgewersbedryf geheers het. Die proefleser was 'n onervare skrywer en daar was geen standaardisering of ander leksikale bronne van nie-Britse gebruiksvorme, veral proto-Afrikaans, wat geraadpleeg kon word nie. Daaropvolgende uitgawes met 'n menigte korreksies deur Schreiner en latere redigeerders word genoem. Die pogings om vas te stel hoe 'n definitiewe uitgawe daar sou uitsien, word bespreek in die lig daarvan dat die vreemde gebruiksvorme van Suid-Afrikaanse Engels nou ingeburger is en algemeen gebruik word. Die artikel voer aan dat toegeeflike proefleeswerk en 'n gebrekkige kennis van die reikwydte van taal betreurenswaardige foute perpetueer, selfs in die magdom vakkundige nuwe produkte van die roman en ten spyte van vakkundiges se pogings om die teks te standaardiseer sodat dit aan hedendaagse professionele norme en konvensies kan voldoen.

As this year marks the 125th anniversary of the first publication of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), it is appropriate to commemorate this event. What I propose to do is to give a brief summary of what I conceive to be its importance for South Africa, and then to proceed to some perennial problems the text raises in order to offer some solutions. I am currently engaged in preparing a freshly edited, new edition of *The Story of an African Farm* for the South African Penguin Modern Classics series, so that I am in a position to report back on some of these dilemmas from a professional insider's point of view. I mean to discuss the backroom business of text production, a topic almost entirely neglected by those who depend on definitive editions for their critiquing.

You will remember that the young Schreiner gave up governessing in the Eastern Cape and took the first draft of *The Story of an African Farm* to the United Kingdom personally in order to arrange for its publication. After nearly two years of rejections by various British publishers, and several cuttings and reworkings, following the guidelines specified by more than one reader, she eventually managed to place it. Apparently this was on the recommendation of another novelist, George Meredith, by then well enough established, yet still having to skivvy it with extra payments for his opinions. Meredith was German-educated, so that there may have been a special affinity between him and her. Certainly he would have understood the subtleties in her presentation of old Otto, the father-figure character and foreman on the farm, a portrait which everyone assumes is based on her own recently deceased father, the Swabian missionary, who had brought his very English wife, Rebecca Lyndall, out to South Africa forty-five years before.

Later, when Schreiner's detractors insinuated that the book had been accepted only because Meredith had pulled it into shape on her behalf, she vehemently retorted that: no, every turn of phrase and every single comma was her own. All he had added was perhaps three full stops. "Not a word, hardly a dot," she said, was different from what she had written herself out in Africa.

Perhaps you have also heard the gossip that the husband Schreiner married later enjoyed sharing with her – that she submitted the text anonymously through the post as by a man, one "Ralph Iron", as was the convention the Brontës had established and the recently deceased Mary Ann Evans, still today known as "George Eliot" had persisted in. When Mr Chapman of Chapman and Hall requested the author to call on him to discuss terms and conditions, he was astounded to meet, instead of some strapping, sunburnt colonial lout, a timid girl with a terribly clipped accent hiding under a broolly.

Even though Miss Schreiner was trying to pay off the cost of the voyage and evading numerous landladies, Mr Chapman was not optimistic about how Mr Iron's earnings in royalties would mount up. By January 1883,

however, once she had done her own proofreading, he had the work out as a double-decker – that is, in the conventional two volumes. By the time the first edition had sold out he was able to pay her the grand sum of £18 2s 11d.

Fortunately for struggling Mr Iron, as you must know, *The Story of an African Farm* did well; a second, one-volume edition was issued later the same year, and a pirated US edition took off as well. Since the latter was never copyrighted, it brought her no payments, which explains why she had never essayed to visit New York City. By 1887 – four years later – Schreiner herself was such a well-known figure about London town that she could insert her own name in brackets under the pseudonym and stand revealed.

The text was then taken over by her later publisher, T. Fisher Unwin, who in the aftermath of its success found it fashionable and profitable to publish many other South African authors – for example, her coeval, William Charles Scully. By 1900 it was advertised as having sold 100 000 copies, with several translations in addition: into Swedish (1890), Dutch (1892), French (1901), Esperanto (1934), German (1964) and Italian (1986), with French again in 1989 under the title *La Nuit Africaine*.

Some of these editions were cheaper ones, and in his introduction to the 1975 Donker edition, also soon a paperback, Richard Rive quotes her as saying:

“The only people I really care to read it are people struggling with material want and the narrowness and iron pressure of their surroundings, who won’t be likely to get a more expensive book. The only thing that ever induced me to write it out was the feeling that some soul struggling with its material surroundings as I was might read it and feel less alone.”

(Rive 1975: 9)

In short, Schreiner never needed to bother to write much more – although she did, prolifically – because she could live off her first bestseller for the rest of her days: such is the career curve of a one-book author. After her death her widower husband Cron, once the text had been taken over by Ernest Benn in 1924, ensured her bountiful work would keep producing for his benefit by introducing an authorised and reset edition. We are using his endorsement as an afterword, not because it shows any particular authoritative insight, but because some of his suggestions about the young lady’s indiscreet use of Karoo “originals” are intriguing at the chitchat level.

Why such a flush of success, leading to the work’s entrenchment on worldwide syllabuses as a watershed work in English literature? Much may be said, on the one hand, about the original reception of *The Story of an African Farm* as an exotic package from the barren limits of British outreach, bringing into the motherland in credible detail a study of a godforsaken outpost of theirs, as the development of the 1860s and then

diamonds in the 1870s impacted upon it, with the railways and eventually the first modern war to follow. To be sure, many local writers, on the other hand, have saluted *African Farm* as just the opposite: a sign that their distant borderland patch could produce literary work of such standard that it was no longer necessary to cringe before the master race (Doris Lessing, Dan Jacobson and Nadine Gordimer are examples). So this is an initial instance of the Empire writing back – as postcolonial critics would have it – as a retort from a lone woman in the idyllic, pre-urban southern hemisphere as well. As her champion, W.T. Stead, wrote in his *The Review of Reviews*: “Her *African Farm* has been the forerunner of all the novels of the Modern Woman. Who could have foreseen that the new and most distinctive note of the literature of the last decade would be sounded by a little chit of a girl reared in the solitude of the African bush?” (1894: 36) Not that he had read her text that scrupulously because, as Schreiner explains explicitly in the very first paragraph, the only “bush” in her Africa are “stunted karoo-bushes a few inches high”. Other misreadings which, let me assure you, abound, we need not go into here.

Be that all as it may, our task here is to face the textual issues which such contextual circumstances produce. Look at the extent of the problem: *African Farm* is an English-language work about an unsettled little society in which hardly anyone speaks proper English; Tant Sannie feels secure only in what Schreiner describes as “low Cape Dutch” and will not understand a word of the foreigner’s tongue; she has to have most of the action explained to her – in translation, please note, by her “Hottentot” maid. Uncle Otto’s English hardly rises above Biblical baby talk, which his son Waldo is to inherit; the Settler orphans, Em and Lyndall, will only become more articulate once the latter has managed to attend a finishing school and learned to lure articulate uitlander adult men. This explains their backwater vulnerability, which the Irish-born interloper, the so-called Bonaparte Blenkins, is able to take advantage of by masquerading as the Duke of Wellington, overawing and manipulating them all with his rickety southern standard. Thus the work is about competing assertions of language dominance, expressing the push and pull of progress over very tenuously held inheritances, all being edged towards dispossession. Furiously translating all this farrago, page after page, Schreiner catches the feel of it for Home readers – the only readers she would conceivably have at that moment of history, for it is quite clear with what contempt any fictional text is regarded locally. Then she has to face Mr Chapman the purifier, who will compromise with her only if she introduces a glossary of “Dutch and Colonial words”, which the work has been encumbered with ever since.

You see that she was not yet sufficiently sure of her English-South-African-language identity to insist that such words were not considered foreign to her. After the Second Anglo-Boer War, by which time coverage of South African affairs in the media had penetrated worldwide, she showed

no such submissiveness in her writing, refusing to footnote any vocabulary she and her countrymen used familiarly, considering it by then global common parlance – the word “trek”, for example.

The only scholar so far to examine this dilemma of vocabulary in Schreiner is Tony Voss, who in 2001 published a scrupulous study of the early revisions that *African Farm* went through. He lists some 400 changes, principally of spelling and punctuation, mostly along the line of such corrections: “Three years had past ...” becomes “Three years had passed ...” and typos like to “carry” a statue is corrected to “carve”. Voss also lists a few authorial insertions: “Yo vaggabonds se Engelschman!” becomes “You vagabonds se Engelschman!” probably because the British reader would have thought the first rendering was incorrect. Thirteen per cent of these alterations, Voss estimates, are such deletions of renderings of Afrikaans South African English which apparently perplexed metropolitan readers too far, sounding offensively German.

Even so, where Schreiner had left such phrases in, her spelling of them was unsettled and another matter: Charles Pettman’s dictionary of *Afrikanderisms* was still a generation away (1913) and so she had to make it up as she went along: hence “bultong” and “sarsaties”, etc. Of course, the Brandfords’ dictionary was not to appear till almost a century later (in 1978), and the definitive Oxford *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* was not completed until 1996, shortly after those of Jamaica and Singapore.

Nevertheless, by 1893 the text of *The Story of an African Farm* had stabilised in the fine Heinemann edition, where it appeared complete and unabridged, and it is that version which we are using as our copy-text today. At that date typesetting on the bench with hot lead slugs was a far more exacting and precise occupation, unlike any of today’s casual efforts with computerisations, and after a microscopic inspection I could find only three errors in a text of over 150 000 words: for example, “late” for “later” and “traveling” for “travelling” ....

In summary, however, Voss was able to conclude that Schreiner’s text has not, in the final analysis, been well served by either publishers or editors. How come? Surely the intrigue was more than that Victorian subs did not use ^ (kappies) and ” (diarises), which meant they insisted on “aasvogels” instead of “aasvoëls”.

I remember Cynthia Kemp, the copy editor at Ad Donker’s when they were preparing their version, returning from the Johannesburg Public Library in utter exasperation. She said that one edition – I think it was the Penguin Classic of 1971, still on sale, based on the Penguin paperback, No. 137 of 1946 – had left out whole paragraphs merely because they would have caused too many widows, with the pagination going over budget. Some other versions in this respect are even worse travesties. Then, of course, different publishers adopt different house styles, which makes for a further set of variations. Yet, in whichever version, however unsatisfactory,

*The Story of an African Farm* still looks creakingly dated, merely because Schreiner had to obey the insular conventions and had no standard to refer to other than her own say so: “You know the sort of thing – half a dozen words in italics on every page. In South Africa I know you at once begin to talk about a *stoep* – I do not know what a *stoep* is – it’s the thing round a house and you sit on it. In various other parts of the world you call it a veranda, a piazza or a ha-ha ....” (Christie 1924: 92)<sup>1</sup>

Since Schreiner’s day Afrikaans, as well as other South African languages, has of course come into its own, with the literatures being standardised as well. Ever since the Second World War a dictionary team like Kritzinger, Steyn, Schoombee and Cronjé of the *Groot Woordeboek* could only regard Schreiner’s Afrikaansisms with amusement and dismay.

The name “Tant Sannie” is perhaps the most memorable detail non-Afrikaners retain after reading *African Farm*. Yet Kritzinger and Steyn point out that, even in that nineteenth-century Cape Dutch, there were two words for “aunt”: “tante” as a general term, but then just “Tant” as part of the nominative, thus “Tant Sannie”; but I can give you a hundred examples of Schreiner scholarship where she is given with that ridiculous earring: an apostrophe “Tant’ Sannie”, as if her title were an abbreviation. This is an example of sheer British ignorance which pervades and bedevils the text unto the present.

The “k-words” are also problematic: “kappje” and “kopjes”, “koodoo” and “kar(r)oo” (which she never capitalises and spells with two “r’s”), and of course “Kafir” which she spells with one “f”. Does the editor of today maintain them in quotes, spelled in such a way that jolts contemporary readers, or just silently let them be nativised? We do not read Shakespeare or Dickens in the original orthography, and we do not put in quotes Australian words like “kangaroo” and “kookaburra”. Are they wearing “veldschoens” or “velskoens”? Do they water their oxen at a “sloot” or “sluit” at an outspan? She explains that Waldo has no strap, or riem, to hang himself with, but then she spells it “reim”.

The clinching irritation is the spelling of the word which in German is “Feld”, and in modern Afrikaans is “veld”. Apparently even today, however, some authorities claim it should be spelled “veldt”. Now Penny Silva has pages about the fantasy word which went out of usage in the seventeenth century, just as the Dutch immigrants arrived in Africa, and on the continent has never been used since. Even Kipling in Bloemfontein in 1900 realised “veldt” was somewhat outmoded and insisted on the four-letter form. By August, 1936, C.R. Prance was still imploring British compositors to cease exploring the boundless “veldt”, as he explained the

---

1. The author of that comment was Agatha Christie in 1924, touring with her first husband to enlist support for the British Empire Exhibition. One notes she had no difficulty with an Indian or Italian word.

“t” was not only elided but unnecessary. But there it is again in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1994 (in a review of a Mike Nicol novel by Giles Foden). I penned my complaint to the editor, pointing out that ever since the revision of *Hart’s Rules* the spelling had been corrected, and that the *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors* specified “veld”, open country, not “dt”. In reply I was more or less told to get “fuct”; or rather that I should refer to what is my own in-house manual, *The Penguin Dictionary for Writers and Editors* which has laid down on page 367: “veldt” = grassland.

So what is a backroom nitpicker in this business of professional book production to do, when an author six thousand sea miles away from her own honky-tonk language reservoir corrects “Robin Island” to “Robbin Island” and our overlords of standards take that as veridical? That is as clearly as I can express our dilemma, as it has been experienced in the intervening 125 years.

## References

Christie, Agatha

[1924]1971 *The Man in the Brown Suit*. London: Pan, p. 92.

Prance, C.R.

1936 A Sub-inspector’s Indiscretions. *The Nongquai*. Pretoria. August, p. 626.

Rive, Richard

1975 Introduction, Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker, pp. 7-20.

Smuts, J.

1977 English with the Flavour of the Veld. *Lantern*. Pretoria. August, pp. 83-87.

Stead, W.T.

1894 *The Review of Reviews*. Vol. 13. London, July, p. 36.

Voss, Tony

2001 Revisions of Early Editions of *The Story of an African Farm*. *English in Africa*. Grahamstown. October, pp. 65-77.

**Stephen Gray**

Emeritus Professor, University of Johannesburg  
(c/o prof.r.gray@gmail.com)