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# 1 On Small and Big Stories of the Quotidian: The Commonplace and the Extraordinary in Narrative Inquiry<sup>1</sup>

LIZ STANLEY

Hanover  
Cape Colony  
Feb 13/01  
Dear Mat,

I was ever so glad to get your letter & the photo. I haven't got a photo I can send you here but I'll send you one "when the War is over" & I can go any where & post anything... I have hired an empty room in a house here, & put in a stretcher & a table, & do my cooking on a spirit lamp, & I & my little dog Neta live together... One just waits week after week... Drop me a line soon. I hope Mr Censor will letter [sic] this letter through.

Good bye,  
Olive Schreiner

(OS to Alf Mattison, Cory MS16 098 / 3)

## Introduction

The above letter was written in February 1901, in a small village under martial law in an up-country area of the Northern Cape area of South Africa, by Olive Schreiner. Schreiner (1855-1920) was – and is – one of the key feminist writers and social theorists, author of *The Story of An African Farm*, *Dreams*, *Woman & Labour*, and also a leading critic of the British provocation of the South African War of 1899 to 1902. Its addressee, Alf Mattison, was a well-known Leeds socialist and historian and he and Schreiner had met through Edward Carpenter. They became friends in the period from 1881 to late 1888, when Schreiner lived in England, a friendship which they resumed when she returned to Britain between 1913 and 1920. The village Schreiner was living in when she wrote the letter, Hanover, was occupied by British forces and surrounded by Boer commando that made frequent punitive raids locally. The comment in her letter that 'one just waits week after week' encompassed the mundane

commonplace, of writing letters, sleeping, cooking and waiting - but it also included an armed guard outside her window, a strict curfew, food shortages, no leaving the village by anyone, spying and paid informing, the rounding up and incarceration of suspected 'traitors' among the Boer population, and three executions following paid informing (concerning charges post-war found to be untrue).

At its simplest, the argument this paper makes is exemplified by Schreiner's letter to Mattison and is that the quotidian - that is, the everyday and seemingly mundane and commonplace - is at one and the same time both ordinary and extraordinary, and has both 'small' and 'big' story attributes. I shall start by outlining the grounding for this, by discussing the terms narrative, memory and ordinary lives and how I see these fitting together. It is important to be clear about the basis of disagreement as well as agreement within narrative inquiry, and so in doing this I also comment on a debate regarding ideas about 'big' and 'small' stories involving Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou on the one hand, and Mark Freeman on the other. From there, the discussion moves to some key aspects of what Henri Lefebvre had called 'the forgotten remainder' and Michel de Certeau 'the invention of the quotidian', then these ideas are used to discuss some Olive Schreiner letters. The concluding section of the paper returns to the conceptual trinity of narrative, memory and ordinary lives by providing some programmatic remarks about theorising the quotidian, with my comments applying to all kinds of quotidian data, not just the epistolary.

### **Narrative, Memory, Ordinary Lives**

In spite of being the Director of the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Narrative & Auto/Biographical Studies, in spite also of being very involved in networks of narrative researchers, the idea of 'narrative' is one I find quite problematic. The term is often used as if it is a characteristic of a kind of data and applied to very different kinds of things in data terms - interviews, newspaper reports, ethnographic fieldnotes, photographs, diaries, case records, autobiographies and so on. The problem here is that narrative is conceived as a quality which somehow inheres in such data in an *a priori* way, but where the idea of narrative is defined (or rather not defined) in terms of story, although the data is by no means composed only by stories, and encompasses any chunk of (oral, visual, written) text chosen for discussion. As Clandinin's well-known monograph puts it, in noting two main strands of approach in narrative inquiry, "...we are studying either lived experience as a *storied phenomenon* or the *stories people tell* about their experiences" (Clandinin, 2007: xiv, my emphasis). Similarly Riessman, 1993; Josselson and Lieblich; 1993, Miller,

2000; Clandidin and Connelly, 2000; and Riessman, 2008, all deservedly well thought of texts, also collapse what is narrative into story.

I have no such problem with the concept of story, which is well-defined, delineated and refers to specified structural elements as well as specific aspects of content. The focus in my own work (cf. Stanley, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Stanley and Dampier, 2006a; Dampier and Stanley, 2008b; Stanley and Temple, 2008) has been on stories that are told, orally, visually, materially, while the term narrative for me makes most sense as a way of thinking about what researchers do, as the analysis we make. And so rather than using narrative to signify some presumed characteristic of data, I use narrative inquiry or narrative analysis to characterise my approach, while the analytical product of this, the researcher's story if you like, is the meta-narrative.

Memory involves three interconnected ideas: what passes for memory of the past is produced through present-time memory practices and is a social construction of 'then' from the viewpoint of a succession of 'nows'. The concept of collective memory, in spite of Halbwachs' (1992) post-Durkheimian credentials, rests upon untenable foundations because it inadequately recognises the absence of the actually collective and the presence of sectional and political claims about this. Also, analytically, memory-claims cannot adequately be understood unless and until what has been vanished, what has been forgotten or sometimes deliberately airbrushed out, has been recognised, explored and theorised as an essential component of memory-making. What these ideas add up to is that the processes of memory-making are, as I have argued elsewhere, best seen in post – slash – memory terms:

“... the analytical idea of post/memory is used to explore how ‘memory’ was shaped and associated with ‘the history’ of those events... how this ‘history after the fact’ gained currency – and also what was forgotten in the process...” and “... the ways in which ‘now’ (indeed, a succession of ‘nows’) have remade ‘then’, a past not available in any direct sense to memory, understandings about which have been shaped by the perspectives and understandings of the present (or rather, a succession of presents)...”  
(Stanley, 2006: 5, 14)

Post / memory in this book, *Mourning Becomes...*, is theorised as the exploration of how ‘memory’ was shaped and associated with ‘the history’ of past events, how this ‘history after the fact’ gained currency, what was forgotten and how, and the ways in which ‘then’ is remade in the present ‘now’, a construction of the past shaped by present-time perspectives and understandings. It also traces out in detail the over time and space chronotopic practices involved, practices which are typically mundane and commonplace, such as telling stories to children, saving some mementoes of times gone by but losing others, commenting to other people about past events in yet more stories; and it also involves the related activities of researching the past by

collecting such stories and using these to shape how the past is depicted in research accounts. The analysis of post/memory is thoroughly engaged with the stories that are told about the past and the over-time changing circumstances of their telling. It takes into account that 'moment of writing' sources (Stanley and Dampier, 2006a, 2006b; Dampier and Stanley, 2008b), such as letters, often provide a rather different, although of course not unmediated, account of such matters compared with those written after the event. And it also engages with the analytical importance of 'the moment of writing' in a way that disassociates it, and the quotidian more generally, from any unproblematically-referential connotations.

There are obviously many roads to Rome and to having 'ordinary lives' interests and perspectives from within a narrative inquiry approach. My own is paved by familiar names from sociological phenomenology, hermeneutics and interactionism, such as Dilthey, Schutz, WI Thomas, Mead, Goffman, Ricoeur, and also by feminist inquiries made in a similar methodological and analytical voice, including the work of Carolyn Steedman from social history and Dorothy Smith from sociology; it adds up to an academic cultural politics (Stanley, 1992). Pursuing this interest in a cultural politics of the quotidian aspects of ordinary lives – that is, the everyday, commonplace and recurrent – recent influences come from the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau.

Lefebvre (2008, 2002, 2005), in particular in the first two volumes of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, has produced some interesting ideas about the construction of culture in a large as well as small 'p' political context, and also argued that research should be a fieldwork against the grain, including against the grain of the academic disciplines, which are fully implicated in the hierarchies and orthodoxies of ruling relations. The basis although not the end of this fieldwork against the grain for Lefebvre should be what he calls 'inventorising', that is, attending to and delineating the properties and processes of the everyday, as a kind of a politically-informed phenomenology. For Lefebvre this is the 'infra-ordinary', the things that are so commonplace and recurrent that, like breathing, we hardly notice them; and he sees it as the 'forgotten remainder', because it lay in his time, and it still lies now, largely outside of what the academic disciplines concern themselves with.

Certeau's (1984) *L'invention du quotidien* (a title which more accurately indicates its concerns than the English *The Practice of Everyday Life*) and (1988) *The Writing of History* deal with the quotidian and the practices by which the seemingly unnameable and unthinkable are in fact routinely named in various 'making real' activities, 'making real' by producing silences, ruptures and break-downs as well as facts and certainties – that is, the social order, life as we know it. It is these micro-technologies of producing social order and social change that point up Certeau's realisation of the huge

endeavour that goes into the invention, the making, of the quotidian, which is absolutely not ‘just there’ but rather repeatedly made and re-made. Also, the quotidian and that vast project of making the social includes what Certeau calls the writing of history and the archive – the making of disciplinarity and its disciplining practices, its ordering of objects and persons, its specification and regulation of practices. Disciplines for Certeau are caste groups: their membership is closely controlled through multiple levels of gate-keeping, including their tight specification of out/inside, the massive weight of regulation, and the definition of acceptable knowledge as tiny incremental shifts in the already known.

There are important interconnected points from these ideas which should guide narrative inquiry thinking about the everyday, the quotidian and its ordinary and extraordinary recurrences. Firstly and foundationally, the vast quotidian is successively re-made, with attention to ‘now’ and the moment of telling or writing opening up an analytical perspective on this. This is the ‘forgotten remainder’ for even (most) everyday life approaches, not just more mainstream ones and, secondly, it has to be remembered, and so fieldwork should inventorise the ‘forgotten remainder’ as the necessary basis of conceptualising and theorising ordinary lives and the everyday. And thirdly, inventorising the ‘forgotten remainder’ runs subversively beneath, as well as against the grain of, disciplining and regulating of the already known, and contributes to a cultural politics; consequently these ideas challenge narrative inquiry to ‘put up or shut up’, that is, to engage in a meaningful way with everyday life and its inventorising.

### **Big Stories, Small Stories and Some Epistolary Examples of the In-Between**

In a number of sole and joint authored publications, including one given at the 2005 Narrative & Memory annual conference, Michael Bamberg with Alexandra Georgakopoulou and others (e.g. Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b; Georgakopoulou, 2006) has critiqued so-called ‘big stories’ in narrative research and counter-posed the idea of so-called ‘small stories’. And, *contra* this, Mark Freeman (2006) has bitten back in defence of ‘big stories’ around the idea that these are ‘life “on holiday”’, arguing that the reflectiveness thereby enabled is helpful in research terms. The debate between Bamberg et al. and Freeman about ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories provides a useful way into thinking about the quotidian aspects of ordinary lives and the ‘forgotten remainder’, in particular by considering whether and to what extent notions of ‘big’ and ‘small’ are helpful in thinking about and researching the quotidian. Table 1 summarises the main areas of contention, but it also indicates large

agreement from both the Bamberg and the Freeman sides of the debate as to what 'big' and 'small' stories are.<sup>2</sup> What is agreed by both includes that reflection is valuable and helps tie together past events and circumstances in a moral retrospect in which self engages in a distanced more accounting practice, and that the moment of telling (or writing, or making, or ...) is concerned with the 'now', with the present, the recent past and the projected near future and is immersed in immediacies.

Bamberg's critique of the 'big' specifies various attributes which he finds unacceptable. These include that 'big stories' are occasioned by an 'outside' - often organisational or institutional - elicitation process; they tend to be focused on particular topics and themes; they provide non-immediate background; they consciously fit their thematic parts to a wider whole; and they are largely if not entirely referential in their assumptions. Interestingly, these are attributes which Freeman in fact accepts, but, *contra* Bamberg, finds laudable in research terms. Also, Georgakopoulou's delineation of 'small stories' builds on Bamberg's thinking to emphasise features which she proposes are the antithesis of big story characteristics, including that 'small stories' *are*, as well as being concerned with, multiplicities, fragmentations and contingencies; and that they are not just telling (or writing, materialities and so on) but social practices in their own right.

Present readers will have got the point: both sides agree as to the binary relationship existing between 'big stories' and 'small stories' and that these are fundamentally different from each other, and what is at issue is their evaluation of reflection and its relationship to research. But I disagree with both of them. Their debate about 'small and big stories' has been conducted abstractly and the 'forgotten remainder' very much forgotten. This is because a detailed consideration of the infra-ordinary 'forgotten remainder' demonstrates that there is actually *not* a binary relationship between big and small stories - there is no fundamental difference between them, but rather complex overlaps and inter-dependencies to the extent that they are part of each other, rather than complement each other as Freeman suggests.

Considering some research data will help gain purchase on these ideas. The data to be discussed is from my ongoing research, concerned with researching, analysing and also publishing in full Olive Schreiner's letters.<sup>3</sup> There were approximately 20-25,000 letters extant at Schreiner's death, many of which were subsequently destroyed. Some 5-6,000 Schreiner letters are now extant and are to be found on three continents, in some thirteen major archives and spread between around eighty significant collections. Some of the concerns that Schreiner's letters deal with involve colonialism under transition in the Cape, feminism and socialism in London, prostitution and her analysis of it, her analysis of 'race' and capital, imperialism 'on the ground', Rhodes' Chartered Company, the Jameson Raid, the South African War 1899-1902,

**Table 1**

<b>‘BIG STORIES’</b>	<b>‘SMALL STORIES’</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
Narratives = about something outside the direct telling	Narratives = between people in the moment of telling	Bamberg, 2006a; Freeman, 2006
Elicited & reflective, memory & the past, non-immediate	Everyday practices, of the time, now & the near future [the present moment taken as though ‘the Real’]	Freeman, 2006; Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b [minus ‘the Real’]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Occasioned, life stories &amp; autobiography</li> <li>▪ Tie together aspects of the past</li> <li>▪ An accounting practice as a moral retrospect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Short &amp; in passing</li> <li>▪ Of &amp; about the moment</li> <li>▪ Mundane, everyday &amp; highly performative</li> </ul>	Bamberg, 2006b
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Density of focus</li> <li>▪ Detailed background</li> <li>▪ Fits thematic parts to a wider whole</li> <li>▪ Organisational or Institutional basis</li> <li>▪ Fits thematic parts to a wider whole</li> <li>▪ Referential</li> </ul>		Bamberg, 2006b
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Multiplicities, fragmentations &amp; contingencies</li> <li>▪ Social practices &amp; talk-in-action</li> <li>▪ About the now &amp; the recent</li> <li>▪ About the projected near future</li> <li>▪ Includes refusals &amp; deferrals</li> </ul>	Georgakopoulou, 2006



women's relief organisations and the concentration camps of this war, international perspectives on women's franchise campaigns, labour issues the the Union rather than federation of South Africa, international feminist networks, pacifism and war economies, and political and economic changes in South Africa after the Great War (Stanley, 2002).

Analysing and theorising the Schreiner letters takes place in the context of ideas about 'the epistolarium' (Stanley, 2004; Jolly and Stanley, 2005; Stanley, 2010). Amongst other things, the concept of the epistolarium is concerned with the quotidian aspects of epistolary exchanges. Letters, like birthday and other cards, postcards, email and text - all aspects of epistolarity - are sometimes one-off pieces of writing between strangers or people who never meet, more often represent one moment in a series of exchanges which combine the epistolary and the face-to-face. *Contra* much current theory, rather than being predicated upon separation, epistolary exchanges are concerned with sustaining the fabric of social relations and maintaining the everyday and face-to-face - many, perhaps even most, letters, email, text and so on are exchanged between people not separated in more than a transitory brief way. Letters and other epistolary forms, seemingly private exchanges, multiply traverse the borders between public and private kinds of exchange, sometimes in one single letter. In addition, they make multiple use of public materialities (postal services, addresses, phones, computers, telecommunications infrastructure) and social conventions (modes of address, appropriate rhetorical forms) to seal private encounters, and they routinely pass on third party information in the form of 'she said, he wrote', including by passing on letters and other epistolary texts. Their exchanges involve seriality - their 'one after another' aspect - and also reciprocity, because the writer becomes the addressee and then the writer again, while the addressee becomes the writer and then the addressee again. And deferral, interruption and cessation are seen as morally accountable, because ordinarily they are viewed as signifying something about the social relationship of the parties concerned, that is, to mean more than just a failure to reply 'on time'.

Taking such things into account, it is clear the system of epistolary exchanges is vast, mundane, recurrent, and involving epistolary networks overlapping and interconnecting with many other kinds of social networks and exchanges. Within this much, most, of the constitutive exchanges involved are commonplace, routine, repeated, with the extraordinary forming interesting breeches within it, both part of and departures from ordinary life. The epistolarium is, indeed, structured by the hallmarks of the quotidian, the 'forgotten remainder' than is ordinary life, and thus my use of to epistolary data in exploring the big story and small story comments of Bamberg, Freeman and others.

So, which Schreiner letters from the c6000 have been selected for discussion here and why? For Michael Bamberg, one of the definitional criteria of ‘small stories’ is that they are short and made in passing; consequently the following discussion focuses on collections of Schreiner letters where there are very small numbers of letters, using this as a proxy for people with whom Schreiner did not ‘correspond’, but sent letters to on an *ad hoc*, contingent and occasional basis. Most of the archived collections of Schreiner’s letters are large, ranging from twenties and thirties of letters to hundreds and involve what were originally lively correspondences between her and these addressees. However, there are twenty-one Schreiner collections thus far transcribed which contain only one or two letters. Small collections 1, 5, 10, 15 and 20 were selected from the project list of these, as cases to discuss. The Nourse small collection was also selected because it is in the Cullen archive, which has major holdings of Schreiner letters. In addition, there are three Schreiner collections with just three letters in them, shown at the end of the list in Table 2, in collections in the British Library, UCT Cape Town and the Cory Library in South Africa. The largest holdings of Schreiner letters by far are at UCT, and so its Duncan small collection was included in the sample. The Mattison small collection from the Cory Library, was then selected as the final case because, although there are (and seem to have been) very few Schreiner letters to Mattison, he was someone she saw as a friend, and so these three letters act as a useful comparison with the more formal letters in the rest of these ‘small collections. This results in the sample cases shown in Table 2 and involves thirty-eight ‘small collections’ letters in total. The whole sample of thirty-eight is first discussed in general terms, and then the text of a letter from each of the selected cases of small collections, eight letters, is provided and discussed in some detail.

Some general points about the thirty-eight ‘small collections’ letters are as follows. These letters were written by Schreiner to very different kinds of people with very different relationships with her. They assume an inter/national mail service, more or less certain delivery, constancy of address, the certainty of reply or some other appropriate response, particular conventions of address, appropriate content for the named recipient, and signature. Overall, these letters are also marked either by sequence (a continuing correspondence of which the particular letter is a part) or connection in the form of a face-to-face relationship, or an ongoing formal relationship, as with a publisher. Some more specific points regarding their ‘small’ and ‘big’ story aspects are as follows.

**Table 2 Schreiner ‘Small Collections’ of Letters**

<b>COLLECTION</b>	<b>NUMBER OF LETTERS</b>	<b>SAMPLE LETTER</b>
Mark Samuels Lasner, Delaware Dear Sir, Librarian, Dear Mr Chapman, Dear Mrs Graham	4	Dear Sir
Kitchener NELM Grahamstown	1	
Lily Bolus NELM Grahamstown	1	
Boonzier NELM Grahamstown	1	
Mrs Goosen NELM Grahamstown	1	Dear Mrs Goosen
A publisher NELM Grahamstown	1	
Miss Battie (Nourse), Cullen	1	Dear Miss Battie
Jan Hofmeyr, Cullen	1	
James Mackenzie, Cullen	1	
Dorothy von Moltke, NLSA	1	Dear Dorothy
James Mackenzie (Ethel Friedlander), UCT	2	
Brown (Molly Dick), UCT	2	
Mrs De Villiers, UCT	2	
Emilia Dilke, British Library	1	
WH Dirks, British Library	2	Dear Mr Dirks
Wilson Barrett, HRC Texas	1	
Oscar Wilde, HRC Texas	1	
Arthur Symons, HRC Texas	1	
Richard Garnett, HRC Texas	1	
Frank Harris, HRC Texas	2	Dear Mr Harris
Frank Padmore, HRC Texas	1	
Patrick Duncan, UCT	3	Dear Mr Duncan
Ernest Rhys, British Library	3	
Alfred Mattison, Cory Rhodes	3	Dear Mat
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>

Firstly, each of the letters in these collections is a ‘small story’ in its own right; it stands as a contingent and bounded ‘social action’ and is complete in itself. These letters are in passing and of the moment, and they are performative in the moment that they are of: they ‘do things’ and this is their purpose. They are in fact a patchwork of disconnected ‘now’ moments of writing characterised by multiplicities, fragmentations and contingencies, and they exemplify quotidian social practices and action. Secondly, at the same time these letters also signal links with other ‘small stories’ (both in and out of Schreiner’s letters) – they are demonstrably part of a much bigger seriality and sequence which encompasses both epistolary engagement and also the face-to-face, with their invocation of prior letters, earlier meetings, and possible near future ones as well. Thirdly, all of these ‘small stories’ are part of (rather than connected to) ‘big stories’ and these ‘big stories’ are part of and do not exist without the ‘small stories’. Their ‘big story’ allusions and references include, in just the eight letters to be discussed later, developments in and the massification of publishing the late nineteenth century, changes to the gender order, the rise of the women’s suffrage movement, changing international divisions of labour, the outbreak and conduct of wars, the rise of the ‘New Woman’, networks of feminist and socialist radicals, and Schreiner’s analysis of imperialism in southern Africa. They also have clear ‘big story’ structural features as well as the ‘small story’ content ones outlined above, including that they are occasioned and elicited, they tie together seemingly disparate things, they have dense focus and attend to background relevancies, and they imply or explicitly make strong referential claims.

These linked sets of comments are grounded in an iterative reading and re-reading of the letters in question against the backcloth of Schreiner’s extant letters more generally. I now focus on eight letters in particular so as to show, as well as discuss, interesting features of their ‘big story’ and ‘small story’ aspects.

Roseneath  
Harpenden  
Herts  
July 6 1888

Dear Sir,

I enclose an envelop [sic] which I forgot to send when sending the short allegory some time ago. Would you kindly return it at once if you do not find it suitable as I wish to send it elsewhere.

Yours faithfully

Olive Schreiner

[OS to a publisher (possibly WT Stead or Oscar Wilde), MSL Delaware]

This letter by Olive Schreiner comes from the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection at the University of Delaware, a collection only in a very loose sense because containing four completely unconnected letters. This particular letter, the second in the collection, is dated 6 July 1888 and is short, formal, rather anonymous, seemingly fragmentary. It is, however, also clearly part of a sequence of contacts between Schreiner and the addressee – they have either exchanged letters or had a face-to-face meeting prior to it being written. Equally clearly, the letter is highly performative – Schreiner wants her allegory back, so as to secure its publication elsewhere, and this is made quite clear. There is a strong ‘small story’ feel to this letter, then, around an unfolding sequence of exchanges involving Schreiner as a professional writer and the addressee, ‘Dear Sir’, who is a publisher or editor. It also has ‘big story’ aspects too. The letter has been occasioned by events external to the letter concerning non-publication of the allegory; it joins together aspects of the past and the sequence of contacts between the writer and the addressee; it involves a strong moral accounting on Schreiner’s part encapsulated in her ‘some time ago’ pointed comment. And in doing these things, it fits one seemingly small thing (non-publication and also non-return of the allegory in question) to a larger whole, one which concerns Schreiner’s publication plans and, by implication, her public fame as a ‘New Woman’ writer. It is also by implication (and is intended to be) highly referential: there is a piece of writing being sat on by the addressee, it is to be returned to Schreiner.

De Aar

May 14<sup>th</sup> 1909

My dear Mrs Goosen

My friend Mrs Haldane Murray has just written to tell me how hard you are working for us at Cathcart. This to hold out the hand of friendship to you. I know how difficult it is to start a new thing in an up-country town, but once started, & when our women really understand the ~~the~~ great good, not only to themselves, but to men & all the nation, the freedom of women will bring, I believe our South African women will be even more earnest & successful than others.

I am sending you a little paper by her husband who is strongly in favour of women’s getting the vote.

Yours very sincerely & wishing you all success[.]

Olive Schreiner

[OS to Mrs Goosen, NELM 87.17.2/1]

Schreiner’s letter of 14 May 1909 to Mrs Goosen (about whom nothing more is known than appears here) transcribed here is archived in the National English Literary Museum collections in Grahamstown, South Africa; there is one letter only in this particular collection. Its content suggests there had been no prior contact, whether epistolary or face-to-face, between Schreiner and

Mrs Goosen. The letter is a decorticated fragment, but it is also strongly signalled as part of a sequence involving third parties, with Mrs Haldane Murray providing one link and, in the future, a publication by Mr Haldane Murray providing another. Its use of 'us' and 'our' performatively include Goosen as one of 'our women' in the women's suffrage movement. It is clearly also intended to be performative in related ways – to encourage Goosen to start the 'new thing in an up-country town', with Schreiner's gift of the 'little paper' having the same purpose. Its 'small story' aspects, then, are about encouraging Mrs Goosen's involvement in the present and the projected near future of women's rights campaigns in South Africa, by promoting her identification with the 'us' invoked and easing her movement into its collective activities. The letter to Goosen has multiple 'big story' aspects too. It is occasioned by external happenings, and it ties together people and activities 'off stage' to the letter itself, doing this around the present and the projected near future, not a past shared in common. There is a formal organisational basis of elicitation, which concerns the work of the women's suffrage groups in 1909 and, by implication Schreiner's letter is highly referential as a 'small p' political piece of writing promoting a 'large P' political involvement on Mrs Goosen's part.

Saturday

[1910]

My dear Miss Battie

I wrote to Cape Town to Miss Burgers there & asked her what <sup>^was^</sup> the ordinary price in Cape Town was for 1000 words if type writer carbons paper &c were given, for four copies; she sent back the enclosed wire saying about 1/3 per thousand. If you care to do some work, I shall have a little ready on Monday next.

Of course you will I know not show the work to any one and ~~unreadable~~ regard it as strictly private. I mention this because once a young lady a very nice girl who did typing for me showed my story to half a dozen people, & said she thought it didn't matter as I was going to print it!

Yours very sincerely

Olive Schreiner

[OS to Miss Battie, Cullen Henry Nourse (Miss Battie) A743/Bf3]

Schreiner's 1910 letter to Miss Battie is archived in the special collections of the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in a collection composed by just this one letter. Seemingly anonymous and fragmentary, in passing and of the moment, this letter is also highly performative: some typing needs to be done and Miss Battie is being lined up to do it. But also the letter is part of a sequence, involving prior contact between Schreiner and Battie before the letter was written, and which also involved Schreiner's contact with a third party, Miss Burgers; and in addition, a projected possible future contact between Schreiner and Battie may

occur ‘on Monday next’. This letter has an unfolding ‘small story’ quality which is situated around these prior and projected future contacts. At the same time, it has some strong ‘big story’ aspects too: it involves a reflective moral accounting on Schreiner’s part which concerns the newly emerging professional relationship between a (female) typist and a (female) author in which a piece of writing for publication being typed is ‘strictly private’. And it is highly referential in its declared purposes, of arranging the typing and ensuring the work in question will not be showed to other people.

Continental Hotel,  
Berlin.

Tuesday [1914]

Dear Dorothy,

I had a delightful journey yesterday, and came to the Continental where I have a very nice little room for 4 [space] a night. My brother is staying at the Adlon. After dinner last night he took a cab & we drove about till 11.30 seeing the wonderful sights in the streets which were crowded by thousands marching & singing patriotic songs. All Unter den Linden was one solid mass. A vast crowd sang & cheered before the Austrian Embassy, & at Bismarck’s monument. It was a wonderful sight. I meant to go on to Amsterdam early this morning but was so tired that I have only now got up & am going to wait till to-morrow. I do trust there will be no war Russia can’t be so mad. I feel anxious not only for yourselves but the beautiful old house at Creisau. Please send me a postcard to c/o Dr. Aletta Jacobs, Amsterdam (that is enough address) just to say if all goes well with you. I can’t tell you, dear, how beautiful my little visit to you was. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. The place itself is lovely, & I liked all the dear folk, but you make it what it is a home of love.

Isn’t it strange, I’ve never felt so well for years as during the days I was there. I suppose it is partly the smoke & heat makes this so different. But Berlin is a lovely & interesting city.

Do try & come to London in the autumn. I don’t like to think I shan’t see you again. Give my friendliest greetings to your husband & thanks for all his kindness, & remember me to your mother-in-law & sister & the boys & Miss Chalmers.

Goodbye, dear child.

Yours with much love

Olive Schreiner.

[OS to Dorothy von Moltke, NLSA Schreiner-Moltke MSC 26 / 2.7 / 1]

Dorothy von Moltke was the daughter of one of Schreiner’s closest friends, Jessie Rose Innes, and Schreiner had known her since she was a child. In the early 1900s, she married into the Von Moltke family, with her father-in-law Chief of Staff of the German High Command with a direct line of contact with the Kaiser. There is no sign that she and Schreiner ever corresponded in a longer term way – the friendship (epistolary as well as face to face) was with Jessie, not her daughter. Schreiner’s letter is a one-off sort of thank you letter

after a 1914 visit, cross-cut by a sort of report on political events, as though they had been discussing such matters when Schreiner had stayed with the Von Moltkes. The letter strongly conveys that its ‘moment of writing’ is the immediacy of the events Schreiner witnessed unfolding around an increasingly possible war between the Great Powers. On one level even more immediately concerned with Schreiner’s evocation of ‘the wonderful sights in the streets’ and the ‘vast crowd’, on another her letter conveys by implication what such scenes of jubilation signified: war. In doing so, it is highly referential: she was there, she saw, she reports on this. This letter to Dorothy von Moltke is also performative in a projected future way – longer-term, Schreiner wants to know that Von Moltke and her immediate family are alright, with Schreiner’s friend, the Dutch feminist and pacifist Aletta Jacobs an intermediary in a possible future context in which direct contact between Schreiner and Von Moltke might not be possible. Schreiner’s letter also has substantial ‘big story’ aspects. It has considerable density of focus in providing detail about ‘after dinner last night’. Its writing was occasioned by external as well as ‘internal’ and private matters, concerning the machinations of the Great Powers. In it, there is significant moral accounting in emphasising human friendship and emotional links across emergent national political divisions, all the more powerfully resonant because of tacit knowledge between Schreiner and Dorothy von Moltke, regarding the role being played in such matters by her father-in-law, pointedly unmentioned in its closing salutation.

Grand Hotel

Alassio

Alassio

[1889]

Dear Mr Dirks

The books ha [sic] just arrived. I cannot promise MS for a couple of months, but it may be much sooner. Thinking ~~of~~ over the matter I have found it impossible to treat Mary Wollstonecrafts work & life, at all, unless I go into the whole matter fully. I incorporate in the essay ten years of thought & work on sex & woman questions; it is not easy to condense it into the limits of an essay. I shall not add notes.

I did not ask Mr Rhys what he intended to pay. How is that arranged according to length, or quality, or what?

I think the book will have an immense sale. The small article I wrote in the Fortnightly some months ago has been three times reprinted in America, & is now published in a pamphlet form in Boston. I shall get it noticed in the Woman’s papers &c before it comes out, & shall get it unreadable reviewed in the Pall Mall & ^some^ other papers by those who are interested in the coming out of the work. I should like every woman in England to read it. I would rather wait & feel that I had done the work as well as it is possible for me. I have given up everything else for it just now.



Are you writing any thing at present I saw power & force that might lead to a great deal in your story in Today. I did not see the end, as I was ill before I left England. I should be very interested to see anything you wrote if you would let me know where it was published. I should like to have the pleasure of meeting you again if I came to England for a short time

Yours faithfully

Olive Schreiner

[OS to WH Dirks, British Library, Ernest Rhys Papers vol II  
(W.H. Dirks) Eg. 3248, Ff10]

This transcript is of the first of two Schreiner letters to WH Dirks in a British Library collection, with Dirks an editor working for Ernest Rhys, the Editor in chief of the long-lived and highly influential 'Everyman' book series. It is part of a sequence of contact that predates this particular letter, written probably in early 1889 when Schreiner was living in Italy – Dirks has already sent Schreiner books, she will send him a manuscript probably in a couple of months. There is also mention of a third party who connects them, Mr Rhys, with Dirks by implication acting as his agent in the matter of publication. At the same time, Schreiner also conveys a point of more personal contact, around Dirks as a writer, so the letter needs to be read both as part of Schreiner's activities in securing publication, and as her establishing links with a community of like minds. With regard to the formal, writer and editor, aspects of her letter, it is performative in setting up an expectation of 'notice' and readership, something which immediately follows Schreiner's questions about payment. And it is also performative in Schreiner closing the letter with 'we writers together' comments, which flatteringly include Dirks with Schreiner and her international fame and immense sales. Its 'big story' aspects concern its considerable density of focus around publishing matters and also in providing details about the background to Schreiner's writing and why there might be a delay with her manuscript. It is occasioned, with the books Dirks sent by implication concerning Wollstonecraft and so Schreiner's manuscript, and there is a 'before the non-event' kind of moral accounting going on, with Schreiner offering explanation and justification for any delay that might occur to her delivering the manuscript she had contracted to provide.

Roseneath

Harpenden

23 August 1888

Dear Mr Harris

Would you kindly let me know where the Russian paper will appear as soon as you are certain as I want to tell the author... I don't want the series of articles on 'Sex Growth' I wrote to you about to appear, till I have published my two novels, as they treat the same subject from the artistic side. It will be a series of at least six

articles, which I intend afterwards in book form. I shall be most glad to avail myself of your Review.

Yours sincerely,

Olive Schreiner

[OS to Frank Harris, HRC Texas Harris, Frank: Recip/1]

There are two Schreiner letters to Frank Harris in the Harry Ransom Center collections at the University of Texas, Austin. The letter selected, dated 23 August 1888, and transcribed here was sent to Harris in his capacity as editor of the internationally published *Fortnightly Review*. It is part of a sequence, for Schreiner has clearly either written or spoken to Harris about her series of articles previously, while her closing comment could be read as implying that Harris had been angling for her to publish in the *Fortnightly*. Her letter also invokes an unnamed third party who Harris is publishing, with Schreiner wanting to tell this person when their work will appear. Her letter to Harris, then, is both about the 'now' and also concerns two projected futures, of Schreiner facilitating a friend's publishing, and Schreiner strategising her own future publishing. Its 'big story' aspects come across clearly. Its non-immediacy is striking, with its focus very much on the projected future rather than the past, and in doing so it collects into its comments others of Schreiner's projected writings, not just the six articles but also the two novels mentioned. This is very much Schreiner as a famous 'New Woman' writer, with her closing 'glad to avail myself of your review' comment putting Harris and the *Fortnightly* in place as the grateful recipients of her willingness to do this.

De Aar

Sep 10th 1913

Dear Mr Duncan

Both my husband & I have been profoundly interested in your program in today paper. It is something of hope around great darkness. Would you mind answering me three questions.

1) If persons say with such views on the native question were to join you, would our views make it impossible for us to work with your organization

2) Why as a democratic society, however moderate, do you not make the enfranchisement of women. There is no fear of its coming too soon as the retrogressive Dutch Element will always be against it for many years. Would a persons holding strong views on the giving of vote to women make them unsuitable members of your party.

3) You do not make imperialism one of the ground principles of your party. Would it, in your opinion, make it impossible for any one to work with you if they were not imperialists?

If you care to answer these questions, please do so quite freely. You may feel that our views are too extreme to make our working in possible

Yours sincerely

Olive Schreiner

[OS to Patrick Duncan, UCT BC 294/D1.33.3]

This transcript is of the third of Schreiner's letters to the diplomat and politician Patrick Duncan, with its highly formal structure, content and tone indicating that it – and so any reply - is very much 'on the record'. Its opening comments suggests it is an 'out of the blue' letter, although at the same time it implies that Duncan will know who Schreiner and her husband are and will also think it legitimate to have the three questions put to him, so perhaps intimating an earlier contact between them. On one level it requests and presumes a response – 'would you mind answering' – but also the formality with which Schreiner's questions are posed implies that it is her formulation of them and addressing them to Duncan that is the point of the letter, not a possible direct reply. Schreiner's letter is very much of the 'now' and a possible future: it takes off from something that happened the same day her letter was written, and its questions seem beneath the surface to be an overture concerning whether Schreiner and Duncan might work together politically. The 'small story' unfolding is about South Africa's changing political scene in 1913 and possible new allegiances. Its 'big story' aspects include the link between its immediacy and the projected political activity 'announced' in the newspaper article about Duncan's 'program' which occasioned Schreiner's letter, and that it links this to wider issues concerning 'the native question', women's enfranchisement and opposition to imperialism and to a future political platform combining these.

The Homestead Kimberley S.A.

April 13 / 96

Dear Mat

Political affairs here have been taking all the life out of me to such an extent that I've not been writing to any one, & never got a chance of writing to tell you how glad I was to get your letter & book.

I may be coming to England at the end of this year & then I'll see you perhaps; any how I shall in the summer (that is about a year from now) when I mean to go north. I want my husband to see the north country folk, who are the best in England.

We have been having terrible times out here. You people in England don't know what the heel of a capitalist is, when it gets right flat on the neck of a people! We have an awful struggle before us in this country.

It's no case of not being allowed to fish on somebody else's ground! - you won't be allowed soon to have even a soul of our own. Now we are killing the poor Matabele.

Good bye dear old man.

Yours hoping to see you soon

Olive

Love to Edward & all the dear folk at Millthorpe when you see them.

[OS to Alf Mattison, Cory MS 16 098/1]

This is the first of three Schreiner letters in the Alfred Mattison collection in the Cory Library at Rhodes University, South Africa, with an extract from another letter to Mattison providing the epigraph for this paper. This letter, dated 13 April 1896, is positioned as part of a sequence of exchanges between Schreiner and Mattison (variously known to friends as Mat or Alf): she had received a letter and book from him; and also, in the projected future, she may see him in England 'at the end of this year' if she visits. Her letter involves further 'small story' components in the 'now' and also the projected near future when they will see each other in England again, but with these comments also including the 'terrible times', which Mattison would have known about from newspaper reporting, which she describes but also emphatically states he could not know the full political implications of. These comments should also be read in the context of the moral accounting going on, which concerns Schreiner explaining and justifying why she had not replied earlier to his communications. Her letter's 'big story' aspects turn on the basis of this moral accounting and the ensuing interruption to the sequence of exchanges - 'I've not been writing to any one'. This was not a matter of 'just life' intruding on good intentions to reply to a letter, and the justification does not in the usual sense concern possible ruptures or interruptions to Schreiner's friendship with Mattison. Rather, as her letter explains around the comments about the political affairs alluded to, it concerns political events which, tacitly, he will understand her absorption in. These involved Rhodes' Chartered Company and its troops invading black territories, culminating in 'killing the poor Matabele', with Schreiner at the time of sending this letter to Mattison also writing her anti-imperialist allegorical novella *Trooper Peter Halket...*, with this providing a further (although not mentioned in this letter) reason why she was not 'writing to any one' and also why she was likely to visit England, around her bringing the manuscript to London for publication (which she in fact did in 1897).

As the above discussion of these eight 'small collections' letters written by Olive Schreiner will have conveyed, their 'small story' and 'big story' elements cannot easily be separated out; these dimensions repeatedly overlay and mutually support each other. The joined nature of the extraordinary and the ordinary within these letters is notable. Moreover, this is as notable when the letters are concerned with 'the extraordinary' in worldly and 'big P' political terms, as it is when they are concerned with rates for typing and justifying why Schreiner may not submit a manuscript as agreed. Schreiner's letter to Dorothy von Moltke as jubilant Berlin crowds celebrated the start of the Great War, her letter to Alf Mattison about living 'week after week' under martial law in Hanover which acts as the epigraph for this paper, her later letter to Mattison about the massacres in Matabeleland, are on one level through and through about the extraordinary. But (and it is a very large but), in these cases the

extraordinary is not so much surrounded by the commonplace and ordinary as it is that these things are so totally imbricated with each other that they form a whole, neither totally extraordinary, nor entirely ordinary, but both at one and the same time. This of course has implications for how the ‘small stories’ versus ‘big stories’ nature of the debate between Bamberg et al and Freeman is to be evaluated, and it is this which the conclusion to this paper addresses.

### **Theorising the Epistolary Quotidian: On Not Forgetting the ‘Forgotten Remainder’**

In conclusion, four interconnected points can be made about researching and theorising the quotidian of ‘ordinary lives’. These are provided in the context of the ‘big stories’ versus ‘small stories’ debate commented on earlier and my rejoinder to it in the form of the iterative readings provided of Olive Schreiner’s ‘small collections’ letters. They are also comments about the quotidian generally, concerning how narrative forms of inquiry generally should deal with it, and the analytical gift horses we should firmly reject – they are *not* to be read as ‘just about Olive Schreiner’s letters’. Consequently, I frame these concluding comments around the interconnections between narrative, memory and ordinary lives, the overarching theme of the conference at which this paper was originally given and thus the context for all the papers in this edited collection, and regarding the programmatic aspects of which my opening discussion was concerned.

Firstly, the continually re-made (re-invented, to follow Certeau) mundane commonplaces of the quotidian provide the bedrock, the ‘forgotten remainder’ that is almost everything in social life, the infra-ordinary which requires inventorising. Attending to this ‘almost everything’ and inventorising it is the first and crucially necessary task of narrative inquiry, that without which its second task, the production of defensible theory, cannot be achieved, and in doing so it provides the grounding on which the analysis and meta-theory of narrative inquiry (indeed, I would argue all forms of social inquiry) stands. This is not a statement about one position or another within the range of narrative inquiry approaches, but applies to narrative inquiry ‘as such’, all of it. Unless and until narrative inquiry fully engages with the quotidian, it does not do its self-declared job of work. Moreover, remembering and forgetting are not optional extras within this, as Ricoeur’s (1983, 1984, 1985, 2004) project reminds us, but are the very stuff of the quotidian. The ‘small letters’ discussed will have conveyed this: remove their temporalities, and in a very real sense there is not much left. Temporality, then, is the essence of the everyday and

quotidian, providing structural features as well as content in the multifarious ways it is used, invoked and lived out.

Secondly, the extraordinary lies within and sequentially is surrounded by the ordinary; and it exists as a natural 'breaching experiment', something which erupts into or out of the everyday and commonplace and thereby helps point up the taken-for-granted features and boundaries of the quotidian. Schreiner's two letters to Alf Mattison, concerning the commonplaces of the extraordinary circumstances of wartime martial law with which this paper opened, and regarding the extraordinary circumstances justifying her failure to reply to a letter from him, both convey this very well. Moreover, while extraordinariness can lie in extraordinary matters in 'worldly' terms, such as wars and massacres in these two examples, it can also more mundanely lie in what is distinctive and stands out from the quotidian, in the sense of what is usual marked by occurrences of the unusual, as with Schreiner's letter to Miss Battie raising matters of privacy and trust in a professional relationship, and her letter to WH Dirks explaining away and justifying what has not yet happened, her to come and in effect 'announced' possible failure to deliver a manuscript on time.

Thirdly, the inventorising of the particular narrative inquiry discussed here, regarding Olive Schreiner's 'small collections' of letters, has amply and I hope incontrovertibly shown that 'big stories' and 'small stories' prototypically co-exist, and both involve overlapping continuums of 'degrees of bigness' and 'degrees of smallness' within the epistolary quotidian. These 'bignesses' and 'smallnesses' do not complement each other, they *are* each other, and prising them apart and seeing them in binary terms is not possible apart from by analytical sleight of hand. Moreover, 'small' and 'big' in story terms is not coterminous with the ordinary and extraordinary, of course. There are examples in these letters of the extraordinary rendered in small stories, as with the jubilation around the outbreak of war that Schreiner's letter to Dorothy von Moltke comments on, and the massification of magazine publication and the related rise of the 'New Woman' writer with an international readership as in her letter to Frank Harris. There are also examples of the ordinary, in the sense of the commonplace, being rendered in 'big story' terms around their detail, their occasioned character, the non-immediacies they contain, and their fitting of part to a wider 'external' whole. Schreiner's letter to Mrs Goosen, which 'holds out the hand of friendship', in order to link Mrs Goosen through such ties both to a network of like-minded people, including Schreiner herself, and also to 'the freedom of women' in a projected wider future that links South African women with all others, is a key example here. Another is the way the contents of a newspaper report become associated with an anti-imperialist platform in the letter to Duncan.

And lastly, the researcher's meta-narrative, the story about these stories which I have been telling in this paper, will be hopefully clear. My overall argument, succinctly, is that gift binaries, no matter how seemingly attractive, as in the 'small stories' versus 'big stories' debate and the approaches favoured by each side in this, should be looked in the face and then turned away from. The narrative gaze and its analytical concerns and practices should be turned firmly towards that crucial task of inventorising the 'forgotten remainder' which is the quotidian and all its fascinations. Binaries are external simplistic impositions – the quotidian, the usually forgotten remainder, ordinary life itself, is rarely so simple, so neat, so ridiculously two-fold, and narrative inquiry should at a programmatic level eschew thinking and working in such terms. Looking at, attending to, inventorising the processes by which, the quotidian is repeatedly re-invented, directs the gaze and shapes the analytical corpus and how it is conceptualised and researched – joined up thinking is required.

### **Endnotes**

1. This paper was originally given as a plenary address to the Annual Conference of the Narrative & Memory Research Group at the University of Huddersfield, April 2009, on the theme of 'Narrative, Memory & Ordinary Lives'. I am grateful to the organisers for their invitation and to participants for interesting questions and discussion. I am also grateful to Helen Dampier for comments on a draft of the paper.
2. Regarding definitional matters, both 'sides' here collapse narrative into story.
3. The Olive Schreiner Letters Project is funded by the ESRC (RES-062-23-1286), whose support is gratefully acknowledged. Details of the research team, analytical concerns and methodological approach will be found on the Olive Schreiner Letters website ([www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk](http://www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk)).

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