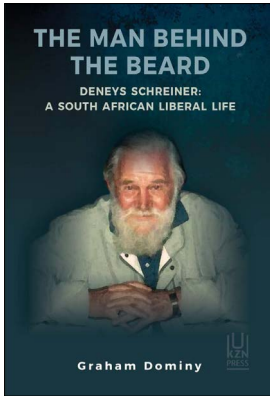




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The man behind the beard.  
Deneys Schreiner: A South African liberal life



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Graham Dominy

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# In the footsteps of famous family forebears to a respected polymath through moral courage

To read *The Man Behind the Beard* is to meet Deneys in person! I picture where and how he lived and worked. I sense the warmth he shared and relive some of his experiences. This is how well Graham Dominy tells the story of Deneys and weaves together a rich flow of events.

My hope is that this review will serve as the appetiser for the main meal and sumptuous dessert served by Dominy: a mental picture of architecture, sights and sounds, south and north, high ground and open spaces, joys and heartaches.

Colin Gardner<sup>1</sup> described Deneys in his obituary as ‘... a good man, a fine scholar and a clever thinker who made a difference at many levels in the lives of thousands: colleagues, students, the marginalised and the hopeful. All this was framed by his beard.’ (quoted on p.199) To this I would add that he was concerned about justice, academic freedom and integrity, and social and educational development. But no, I’m not going to say when the beard started growing -- only that when it became time for Deneys to shave it off, he also used the occasion to play a trick on a close family member!

The book’s chronology tells of the development of Deneys’s character; details the influences on his life and their outcomes; and provides insight into him as an individual in the context of his forebears, childhood, youth, wartime service, and studies in South Africa, Britain and America. In the process, his family life, his research and academic career, including tertiary institution management, are linked with his political awareness and contributions. Of course, Deneys’s life story unfolded in the context of colonialism and its aftermath, still so pertinent today. Deneys was not spared deep family tragedy, and the reality and emotion thereof will resonate with most readers.

Dominy portrays a man whose life was enriched through nature, culture, sport, art, politics, literature, history, economics, science, and open and meaningful relations with family, friends and colleagues irrespective of domain, sphere or hierarchy. He showed courage, intellectual power, moral character and humour, all of which may powerfully and vicariously guide us now and in the future.

Writing a review always poses the risk of spoiling a good read. I therefore do not reveal too many facts and details. It is sufficient to say that *The Man Behind the Beard* is very accessible, and should be of interest to a wide, multidisciplinary readership. George Deneys Lyndall Schreiner walked this earth from 1923 to 2008. The observant reader will immediately note that he lived, fully aware, through a world war and the momentous upheavals and transformations in South Africa. Through all of this he became a geophysicist of standing, a true scientist and academic; developed a natural teaching ability; served a stint as researcher at Wits and as Dean of Science of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN); married a wonderful life partner, Else – his equal or better, who gave him support of note; fathered and raised together two sons and two daughters; and became Vice-Principal of UKZN, with all the administrative (read committee) work, managerial, academic and other leadership challenges it entailed. His contributions as a liberal (thinker and practitioner), in the best sense of the word, are what stand out in the struggle for democracy. Although he had no formal legal, political or constitutional background, his transformative work at UKZN, and the enormous role he played as founder member and chairperson of the so-called Buthelezi Commission, were most likely the two biggest feathers in his cap. Dominy sensitively, in a nuanced manner, relates how Deneys and his co-cast chose to resist inequality, unfairness and discrimination – some through armed struggle and others through different forums and strategies; some by choice and others by uncomfortable compromise; and some from within the system and others not.

Perhaps a brief word on family lineage is fitting. Olive Schreiner was Deneys’s great-aunt. His grandfather and father, respectively, were Prime Minister of the Cape and Judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa. His father could easily have become Chief Justice, politics permitting. Deneys and Else’s children followed this lineage. One daughter, a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, served jail time of about four years, complete with all its harrowing experiences, through one of the final trials conducted by the outgoing apartheid regime, before being pardoned. Everyone in the family practised their citizenship with commitment.

The book is a biographical work in the finest tradition of historiography. The content covers a humble, but critical, figure in the history of South Africa who witnessed critical developments that often helped shape pertinent outcomes.

Dominy, former National Archivist of South Africa, made many important contributions on the African continent and abroad in documenting aspects of heritage. The author shows true craftsmanship in tracing facts from a staggering array of sources. These included interviews with family, former colleagues, friends and journalists; many weeks scouring archive collections; and studying the usual range of formal publications. He then, in the second act of wizardry, artfully wove the raw material into a tale; a narration (subtly witty) that holds your attention. The craftsmanship is on par with that of the well-known historical novelist, Simon Winchester.

The foreword may reveal more about Deneys and the book, being written by the current South African Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Blade Nzimande. This is no coincidence and should also not be perceived cynically as nifty footwork to endorse the author or publisher. The foreword is borne from the deepfelt, close relationship between Deneys and Blade Nzimande. Schreiner served as mentor to many people and was the guardian of their access to tertiary learning in difficult times. The foreword reflects an appreciation for each other’s worth and values, grown during regular Sunday-evening dinners at the Schreiner’s homestead in Pietermaritzburg.

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The excellent structure and pace of the book are complemented by a categorised bibliography, an index, notes and acknowledgements. In summary, succinct formulation, a natural flow, interesting presentation and the clever use of wit make for a good read!

## References

1. Gardner C. Obituary: George Deneys Lyndall Schreiner (1923–2008). *Natalia*. 2008;38:83–85.
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