

Campaigning for life: a biography of Dorothy Frances Buxton*Peta Dunstan*

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Dorothy Frances Buxton abjured the description “feminist”. Though most active in politics and social policy from about 1910 through to the 1940s, her family and social class circumstances gave her the wealth and freedom to plot her own course through English society and history. Her marriage to the future Liberal, then Labour, politician and occasional member of parliament Charles Buxton (she came from the Jebb family, also Liberal in politics) gave her a partner who encouraged her activism, and respected her idealism – which could also look like eccentricity. She rejected fashion, believed in plain food and refused to entertain. She constructed her own religious observance, taking heart from William James’ argument that all religion in the end had to be based on individual experience rather than the doctrines of institutions.

Peta Dunstan tells the story of this remarkable woman with several purposes in mind. Probably the most pressing is to correct the historical record that it was her sister, Eglantyne Jebb, who is credited as the founding genius behind the Save the Children fund and organisation, rather than Dorothy. Dunstan makes a strong case for Dorothy, that the organisation and campaign would never have been founded without her effort, and no doubt future histories of Save the Children will be corrected accordingly.

The focus of this journal, the *History of Education Review*, is educational, childhood and youth history. There is not a great deal in this biography that contributes specifically to these subjects. The author is concerned to provide a substantial family history and exploration of the religious beliefs of Buxton as well as her political activity. Little of this activity other than her work in the early 1920s for Save the Children had anything much to do with education or young people. In the First World War her main effort was to correct the jingoism and propaganda being fed British people by publishing through the *Cambridge Magazine* extracts from foreign newspapers, including German. She was a great believer that presenting undeniable facts, no matter how contrary to popular prejudice, was an important contribution to the social good.

She opposed the Treaty of Versailles (1919) in a long-running campaign, insisting quite rightly, that the forced destitution of the German people as punishment for the war would only lead to another. She was aware from the beginning of the threat of Nazism, when many in her social class and country insisted that Hitler could be negotiated with, and if the price of peace was ignoring what was happening to Jews, the Lutheran Church and the inmates of the new concentration camps, and more, then it was a price worth paying. Through a family connection Dorothy went to Germany in 1935 in an attempt to persuade Hermann Goering against concentration camps and other Nazi activity. Needless to say, Goering was unimpressed. Dunstan, the author of the biography, makes the wise point that the 20th century saw decreasing opportunities for individuals and small voluntary committees to change government policies. Buxton’s campaigns worked this way, either that or through



supporting her husband in Westminster with well-prepared briefs, though Charles Buxton even working within the Liberal and then Labour parties had few successes to his name.

Dorothy Buxton was a mother as well as a public person. She was not an empathetic mother, using her social class circumstances and wealth to avoid close engagement with her children. Governesses were hired, she was usually too busy and too insensitive to respond to their needs. As was common in her class, the children were shunted off to boarding schools. The daughter experienced life-long difficulties and never bonded with her mother. The son eventually came to terms with Dorothy. These family circumstances present us with a small “case study” in early-20th-century English family and childhood history.

Buxton’s work for refugees (mainly in Central European), the countering of famine, the campaign against censorship in time of war, her work to assist “alien” refugees and internees find a place in English society, all of these campaigns signify a remarkable woman for her times.

As a reviewer for this journal, I am aware of some silences I should like to have seen addressed. One is professional in nature. *Save the Children* was but one element of a great historical movement from the late 19th century, commonly referred to as “child saving”. I would like to have seen more reference to the historiography surrounding this. I should also like to have seen more on Dorothy’s place in women’s, if not feminist, history. It is one of the common problems with biography, the stories of individuals can stand a little too much apart, independent, from their place in broader historical movements. The second issue relates to Dorothy Buxton as a member of her social class. The author has an excellent discussion of this at one point (p. 45ff), but missing from the action is the British Empire and its colonial subjects, especially the non-white subjects, that made the lives and freedoms of Buxton and her class possible.

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