

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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Eglantyne Jebb

©Clare Mulley

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Eglantyne Jebb working at Cambridge.

I first came across Eglantyne Jebb when working as a rather struggling fundraiser at Save the Children, I found some comfort in her words; 'the world is not ungenerous, but unimaginative and very busy'. A few years later I left the Fund to have my first child – thereby showing far less commitment to the cause than Eglantyne, who never had children of her own.

It was now that I started to look into the life of this extraordinary woman whose voice sounded so immediate and whose legacy, in the form of both Save the Children, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, are

so hugely important today. My research started at the Fund's archives, where among other things I found a crumpled leaflet from 1919, featuring a photograph of a starving Austrian child, which Eglantyne had been arrested for distributing in Trafalgar Square that year. The word 'Suppressed!' was written in Eglantyne's unmistakeable handwriting at the top, the exclamation mark recording her outrage at the British Government's policy to continue the economic blockade to Europe as a means of pushing through war reparations. I knew then that I was on to a good story.

It is a funny thing to search for someone in the archives of public libraries and between the lines of private letters. Sometimes Eglantyne remained obscure, but more often she startled me with her sudden vivid presence; particularly her dry sense of humour constantly appearing in anecdotes and sketches. Sometimes she seemed uncannily close. Once having lunch with the granddaughter of her closest girlfriend, Margaret Keynes, the sister of the economist, I learned that I was eating from the plates the two had always used.

Another time her great nephew, an archaeology lecturer who recognised my growing need for 'evidence', presented me with a curl of Eglantyne's auburn baby-hair – real DNA at last, I almost had her between my fingers. At times like this I sometimes felt I was invading Eglantyne's personal space a little too far – almost psycho-stalking my subject. However there was also the odd occasion when I felt that the tables were turned and I was the one being watched.

Moving to Saffron Walden about half way through writing the book, I went out for dinner with a close friend who lives locally, and a friend of hers. It soon turned out that my friend's guest was related to Eglantyne's one great male love – a man about whom I had been able to find out almost nothing. Two weeks later I was having dinner with his grandson, and getting the inside story of the couple's doomed romance. It is uncovering new stories like this that makes researching lives so rewarding.

Writing Eglantyne's inspirational life has been a wonderful journey. Here is a woman who not only founded the first global children's charity, but also wrote the most universally accepted human rights instrument in history – all in an era before all women even had the vote - and yet her wonderful name is all but forgotten today. This is not right, and is something that I hope my book will go some way to change, as well as raising some money for the charity's wonderful programme work today. The project has also meant a lot to me personally; and it is with some pride that my first child has Eglantyne as her middle name.

EDITED EXTRACT FROM BOOK

Eglantyne Jebb in Cambridge

In 2009 the international development agency Save the Children celebrated 90 years since its public launch by Eglantyne Jebb and her sister Dorothy Buxton in response to the starvation across Europe after the First World War. Eglantyne went on to draft what is now the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most universally accepted human rights instrument in history. In this article Clare Mulley looks at the importance of Eglantyne's early years in Cambridge to her later life and work.

Eglantyne moved to Cambridge in 1901, making a new start after a disastrous stint as a teacher, and to be close to her uncle Richard Claverhouse Jebb, Chair of Greek, and MP, at the university. It was wonderfully refreshing to arrive in the vibrant intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge as the new century stretched ahead. Eglantyne's house was at the edge of the city, although Cambridge was then small enough for this to be just a short walk or cycle ride from both colleges and town, and she embraced her new life enthusiastically, happily settling into a round of dinner parties and college balls, picnics, poetry readings and general intellectual debate in the company of some of the most distinguished men and women of the time including the Darwins, Keynes and Trevelyan.

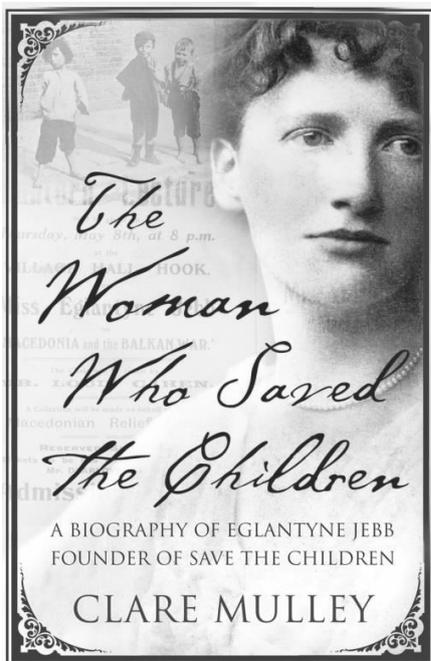
Eglantyne had soon fallen passionately in love with a handsome Cambridge don with whom she went riding, usually leaving the other women far behind. So strong were her feelings that when Eglantyne discovered he had proposed to another, she considered drowning her sorrows in 'the darkening marshes' outside the city. Pulling herself together she decided to fill the gap in her heart and her diary by throwing herself into social work instead.

Eglantyne was already going to local meetings of the Charities Organisation Society to see how cases of the 'deserving' poor were assessed, and what impact the work had. Although she approved of the principles of research promoted by the COS, she was not convinced by the organisation's support for a system whereby the wealthy distributed charity based on their assessment of the moral character of the less fortunate. Now Eglantyne became an assistant to Florence Keynes, mother of the economist and a leading figure in local charitable and civic circles. Florence's first impression of Eglantyne was that she was 'extraordinarily beautiful', with her red-gold hair in 'full bloom' and her white skin always quick to betray emotion. But she was also impressed with Eglantyne's sincere social conscience. Eglantyne was delighted when she was commissioned to compile a comprehensive social survey of Cambridge, and threw herself enthusiastically into the work. *Cambridge: A Brief Study in Social Questions* was published in 1906, and emphasised that a large part of the city's problems resulted from its transition from a small agricultural and academic centre, into a modern city whose population had

quadrupled since 1830 without the requisite investment in housing, sanitation, education or employment. It was the first thorough social survey of Cambridge, and later served as a model for social reports across the country.

Eglantyne was a Liberal, not opposed to the capitalist system *per se*, but critical of the uneven distribution of its rewards. Borrowing the influential New Liberal concept of citizenship, she saw the crux of the problem as being one of injustice rather than misfortune. She was therefore dismayed by the scant amount of voluntary work undertaken in Cambridge, and the limited use made of the franchise. But Eglantyne's understanding of citizenship also had an important and innovative angle: the importance of children as the next generation whose welfare and rights must be respected.

Eglantyne's time at Cambridge had given her two crucial insights. Firstly that she now wanted to dedicate her life not to home and husband, but to a serious contribution to social policy. Her second insight was into the nature of that contribution. For Eglantyne poverty could no longer be excused as the result of natural law or providence, or purely a government issue, but was a collective social responsibility that could only be addressed through the promotion of active citizenship across all social-classes, and generations. Although she was still focused on the domestic agenda, this basic premise of the rights and responsibilities of the next generation would underpin all her later achievements.



Note: The author donates all royalties from her book to Save the Children.

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