

Introduction

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The articles in this issue are among those presented at a specially convened conference held at King's College, London on 20 June 2016. The conference, 'Welcome to Britain? Refugees Then and Now', was organized by the Remembering Eleanor Rathbone group, set up in 2015 specifically to commemorate and celebrate the life and work of Eleanor Rathbone, MP, during 2016, seventy years after her death in 1946. It was also timed to coincide with the first day of Refugee Week 2016, whose theme, appropriately, was 'Welcome'. The day brought together a number of speakers from across a range of disciplines, with morning papers considering an historical perspective of the refugee question, while the afternoon contributions focused on contemporary refugee issues.

So why should Eleanor Rathbone be remembered, and where does she fit into a discourse about refugees? First and foremost, she became the best friend that refugees, especially Jewish refugees, had in Britain before and during the Second World War. Her unwavering support earned her the accolade 'MP for refugees' among the refugee community, while her detractors in government circles dubbed her 'the perishing Miss Rathbone'.¹

Born in May 1872, her commitment to the welfare and rescue of refugees in and from fascist and Nazi Europe came towards the latter part of her long career as a humanitarian activist, a path she embarked upon at the age of twenty-five.² The dual forces of nature and nurture were responsible for shaping her future as a great humanitarian activist. Her father, William Rathbone VI, was a highly respected philanthropist, social and welfare reformer, as well as a Liberal MP, and he and his wife Emily instilled in their children a respect for the material advantages that wealth gave them. To this end, Eleanor and her siblings were regularly reminded of the duty they had to those less fortunate than themselves, implicit in the family dictum, 'Whatever ought to be done, can be done'.³ Eleanor wholeheartedly embraced this maxim, turning her back on an academic career and instead taking on 'unsuspected obligations' in her



determination to represent the underrepresented in society, regardless of race, religion or gender. Her life was marked by pioneering events and achievements, beginning with her becoming an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford, in 1893 where she embraced the feminist and suffragist movements, and where she immersed herself in the study of 'Greats', a combination of classics, ancient history and philosophy. The latter had a profound and enduring impact upon her, for it introduced her to the Idealist school, which stressed practical philanthropy and individual and voluntary service, reinforcing the family credo. Somerville provided an environment that nurtured her intellectual vitality, where her feminism could develop and where she could engage with challenging the status of women and embrace the suffrage movement in the company of like-minded young women.⁴

But she also knew that most opportunities she considered worth pursuing were closed to women. Deciding what to do with her life was affected by her failure to achieve as good a degree as she or her tutors had predicted, and on her return to Liverpool in 1896 she concluded that she could not, with a clear conscience, immerse herself in academia. Nor could she, as she said, 'detach herself from all the wrongs in the world' when there were people around her who were clamouring for help.⁵ So, in 1897, and at her father's suggestion, she cut her teeth on her first, but by no means last, piece of social investigation, a study of the casual dock labour system in Liverpool. Poverty, and its effect upon the family, was at the heart of many of her early enquiries, all undertaken with meticulous attention to detail and to the recording of facts. The professionalization of social work owes much to her innovation in Liverpool in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as do many of the organizations we take for granted today. These include the Citizen's Advice Bureau and Age Concern, both of which grew out of the Personal Services Society that Eleanor helped establish in late 1918, and which still operates in the north of England as PSS, Person Shaped Support.

Her first foray into the political arena came in 1909, when she became the first woman to be elected to serve on the 120-strong Liverpool City Council. For the next twenty-six years, until her resignation in 1935, she campaigned across a wide range of social issues, from abolishing unsanitary slums and improving housing to reducing the hours of labour and raising the rates of wages, and providing better education. That separation allowances were paid to the wives of serving soldiers during the First World War, not just in Liverpool but across the country, was down to Eleanor's determination and organizational skills, and the creation of a model that was replicated across the country. Relieving family poverty and the financial dependence of women upon their menfolk led her to establish her family

endowment campaign in 1918, a battle that was to run for decades before the Family Allowance Act finally passed onto the statute book in 1945.

From local to national politics, Eleanor's election to parliament in 1929, as Independent Member for the Combined English Universities, was a remarkable achievement for a woman – she was one of only fourteen female politicians in the house, which numbered 615 in total. She soon showed her strength, emerging as possibly the most powerful backbencher of the age, becoming masterful at putting down parliamentary questions and using them to force concessions, publicize issues or to coerce ministers into revealing embarrassing information. She was relentless and persistent, and with no party to exercise control over her, was almost impossible to keep quiet. Eleanor would indeed go to almost any lengths in her quest to shape legislation, especially by the introduction of amendments.

From her new platform, she was able to expand her horizons to include issues in Britain's colonies, and became a champion for the human rights of girls and women in India and Kenya, as well as Palestine, then ruled under a British mandate. In the subsequent interwar years, Eleanor, who was a member of the League of Nations Union, engaged much more actively with foreign affairs, asking an increasing number of questions in the House as the situation in Europe deteriorated, as Germany rearmed and as Abyssinia and Italy fell to the enemy. The potential risk to the independence of the countries of the Little Entente became of greater significance and Eleanor was among an unofficial party, led by the Duchess of Atholl, who visited the Eastern European states in February 1937. On her return, she reported to members of the House, saying:

We hear much less about Rumania and Yugoslavia than we have recently heard about Czechoslovakia, but these three countries in the Little Entente are our national allies. All three have special claims on us. We are sometimes asked whether this country would be willing to fight for Czechoslovakia if it were attacked. Might we not ask rather whether it would be decent to abandon this country, the last free enlightened democracy left in Central Europe? Also, would it be safe?

She concluded by saying, 'Let those who believe in power politics remember Bismarck's dictum, "He who is master of Bohemia is master of Europe"'.⁶

And there was another conflict to consider, that of Franco's military uprising in Spain, and what Eleanor described as the British government's 'sham of non-intervention'.⁷ Her susceptibility to human tragedy, and her feelings of personal responsibility, came to the fore

again in late 1937 when she worked with Katherine, Duchess of Atholl and others in organizing the evacuation of several thousand child refugees from the Basque combat zone during the Spanish Civil War. In the following year, the two women were involved in organizing the dispatch of dozens of food ships to the Republic's starving and blockaded cities, and when Eleanor and her allies found out, in early 1939, that more Republicans were at risk of summary executions and reprisals, and that the British government was unwilling to help rescue them or offer protection for rescue vessels, they simply circumvented officialdom. Ships were organized to run the blockade and the National Joint Committee succeeded in getting several boatloads of refugees out, and to safety. When Rab Butler, the Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, commented on the lack of a voluntary organization to deal with entry requests from prominent Republican officials, Eleanor immediately set up and chaired the British Committee for Refugees from Spain, which selected, arranged passage for and guaranteed support for the few hundred refugees allowed to enter.⁸

The child rescue scheme had an enduring impact for it proved to Eleanor that if enough public pressure was exerted on the government, people could be rescued from war-torn countries. It also made her realize that the British would respond generously to any refugee who managed to get to Britain.

But international affairs and the threat posed by fascism and Nazism soon became her priority. Her response to the refugee crises that emerged across fascist and Nazi Europe was, in many respects, a natural reaction, for the people that she sought to rescue, both prior to the outbreak of war and then in the mid 1940s, were in mortal danger. The so-called enemy aliens, most of them interned refugees from Nazi Germany, whose cause she championed during the Second World War, were underrepresented and vulnerable, and she saw it as her duty to do whatever she could to help them. Hers were the politics of conscience, and while she always put the national interest first, and never lost sight of the threat faced by Britain from Germany, she persisted in demanding that the government adopt a more humane response.

Susan Cohen was awarded her PhD in 2005 by the University of Southampton for her thesis on Eleanor Rathbone and her work for refugees. Her monograph, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees*, was published by Vallentine Mitchell in 2010. She is co-founder of the Remembering Eleanor Rathbone Group.

Notes

1. Minute of Walker, 29 February 1944, National Archives (hereafter cited as NA) FO 371/42727, W2971/16/48.
2. Susan Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).
3. Eleanor Rathbone, *William Rathbone: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1905).
4. For the most comprehensive biography, see Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (London: Yale University Press, 2004).
5. Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone*, 62–3.
6. *Hansard HC* vol. 321, cols 3120–3121, 25 March 1937.
7. *Hansard HC*, vol. 328, col. 67, 26 October 1937.
8. Butler to Eleanor Florence Rathbone (hereafter cited as EFR), 21 February 1939, NA FO 371/24153; EFR to Butler, 23 February 1939, NA FO 371/24154. For Spain, see Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Spanish Aid Movement in Britain, 1936–39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986).