

Violet Butler: Blue plaque unveiling 29 October 2021

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We're here to celebrate the life and work of Violet Butler. Miss C.V. Butler. Youngest of four children, three girls and one boy, born to a headmaster and academic, with an uncle who was an early econometrics specialist in Oxford, Professor Edgeworth, and a great-aunt Maria Edgeworth, who was a literary genius.

Who was she? Why is she celebrated? Daughter (to a cleric and academic Arthur Butler who married one Harriet Edgeworth); sister (to Olive Butler, who indefatigably worked in the LMH settlement for Women in Southwark 1911–1935, London, to Ruth Butler who taught at the predecessor of St Anne's, the Society of Oxford Home-Students for women, and to Harold Butler, Classical scholar); aunt and great-aunt to her brother's children and grandchildren; Miss Butler to generations of students at Barnett House and at the Oxford Home Students and of Oxford's girls' club members in Rosehill; member of a multitude of Boards, both local and national – the national button makers, local education and employment boards, on West Oxford Primary School board until the 1970s – crowned fondly in her Festschrift as the Queen of Barnett House – and certainly the oldest survivor of its first heady years as a Citizen's House, bringing Oxford City, its trades unions, councillors, and philanthropists together with the University for mutual advantage.

Her beliefs shine out, undimmed, through her publications, and through the legacy of her students. She had faith in the power of community, and the importance of supporting communities – and individuals in those communities – for the good of all. She was an early advocate of addressing the democratic deficit.

Her first book – which these days would have been her Doctorate – was a painstaking analysis of Social Conditions in Oxford, undertaken not for its own sake but to hammer home shortcomings that needed putting right to the Oxford authorities and the Oxford elite. - The philanthropists needed to co-operate, so that thirteen people didn't arrive on the doorstep of a widowed mother of ten; the young needed more education, more out of school clubs, an employment exchange – these were just two of her findings, and both led to changes. She went on to analyse the shortcomings in domestic service at the end of the war, and wrote what was really a manual on how to empower a rural community to thrive and grow in the

1920s. ‘Village Survey Making’ These were powerful publications. What we have from the wonderfully rich but rather unsorted boxes of her notes and work deposited in the Bodleian is a real light on her teaching – she co-ran the social training course in Oxford from the early years of WW1 until the late 1940s, tutoring the women. Social training of course became in the end what we know as Social Work, and Teresa Smith here oversaw that course as it developed after Butler’s time. We think of it as case work now, with families in various points of need, from childhood to old age, and largely in the State sector. In Butler’s time ‘social training’ embraced a much larger field – community work, personnel work in industry, missionary work, state and voluntary work – Butler was a great believer in state and voluntary working together, in harmony, and was very proud of the work on Libraries which she undertook with Grace Hadow – which set up libraries across the district run by volunteers and forced the County Council to take them over – and the librarian – when they were established.

She never left Oxford, only left the family house very late on. There is an unsent letter deep in her Bodleian boxes where she berates herself for not leaving, but explains the stark alternative she faced – one which faced her generation of women – either a woman living in a ‘slum’ pursuing her profession, or living at home. At home she was able to meet a rich variety of academics and philanthropists, from the Webbs and Barnetts and of course the other Butlers and Edgeworths – she was able to receive Belgian refugees in the first world War, and live a warm, safe, comfortable life from which she could pursue her studies and work. Her income for all those years of teaching was a very small pittance – she was only paid a university salary during the period around WW2 and then arguably because the University needed to account for the Rockefeller grant it had received. She continued active in civic life, an air warden in WW2, a supporter of Rosehill Community Centre, on Council Committees, until very near the end of her long life.

She is remembered by students who say her emphasis on methodical note-taking was absolutely invaluable, by women on Rosehill who fondly remember Miss Butler from their girls’ club days, and by members of Barnett House and her family – and her work on rural community building was replicated in India, Australia, Indonesia as well as in the UK.

She richly deserves her Blue Plaque