

## **A Critical Woman: Barbara Wootton, Social Science and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century**

**Review Number:** 1395

**Publish date:** Thursday, 14 March, 2013

**Author:** Ann Oakley

**ISBN:** 9781849664684

**Date of Publication:** 2011

**Price:** £30.00

**Pages:** 464pp.

**Publisher:** Bloomsbury Academic

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Margaretta Jolly

### **Who?**

Who first suggested community service as an alternative to imprisonment in Britain? Who got the Bill to abolish capital punishment on the statute book? Who chaired a commission on drugs which recommended reducing penalties for cannabis possession in 1966? Who indeed was the first woman to be a member of a national policy commission in 1924, go as a delegate to a League of Nations World Conference in 1927, work in the House of Lords as a life peer in 1958, and become Deputy Speaker there in 1965? Who campaigned in Parliament to abolish corporal punishment in schools, legalize assisted dying and abortion, change the laws about who could marry whom, protect the environment, and treat crime on the roads as equal to crime in other places? Who was the first Chair of the Countryside Commission? Who was a founder member of the Abortion Law Reform Society, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the British Humanist Association, the British Sociological Association and the first modern movement for human rights? Who provided the first framework for understanding how what people earn is determined as much by social as by economic factors, and participated in a famous and influential debate about the benefits of centralized economic planning versus those of free-market capitalism? Who took the first systematic look at theories about the causes of anti-social behaviour in young people, challenged professionals' 'expertise' and helped to establish a new critique of medicalization? Who was the first academic and policy activist to argue seriously that welfare policies must be based on sound scientific evidence?

Who? Who? Who? Ann Oakley opens her majestic biography of Barbara Wootton with this bold and repeated question, but it is a question with a double edge. Baroness Wootton of Abinger was extraordinary, yet today, little remembered. In this puzzle, Ann Oakley finds a perfect biographee-shaped hole. And, through filling that hole, she makes an excellent case for biography as a form of historical research.

Born Barbara Adam in 1897, Wootton was the daughter of two high-minded Cambridge classicists, receiving a one-sided education that enabled both her stunning intellectual powers and her life-long rebellion against pursuing knowledge without obvious practical use. Wootton was a social scientist, but also a champion of adult education, a lay magistrate for almost 50 years, a campaigner and, eventually, an influential member of the House of Lords. Her career spans researching for the TUC and Labour Party in the

1920s, leading adult education as Principal of Morley College for working men and women in the 1930s, contributing to the foundation of the welfare state and the European Union in the 1940s as Reader in Social Studies at the University of London, and then being Professor at Bedford College in 1948. Wootton gave up her job in 1952 to produce her major publication *Social Science and Social Pathology* (1959). This was aimed squarely at reforming social work, penal and medical practice together, and was deeply challenging to socialists and liberals as well as the establishment. Her blisteringly radical ideas included evidence-based redefinitions of crime that put middle-class car owners alongside so called 'problem' families and an analysis of unhappiness as a normal area of life being pathologised by psychologists, ideas that others only came to in the 1970s. Wootton used her public positions to apply such ideas. As Chair of the juvenile courts in London for 16 years, for example, she refused to decide for imprisonment when she could offer community service, giving the teenage John Bird the life-chance that led him later to become founder of *The Big Issue*. As Chair of the Countryside Commission in 1966, she helped to curb the development of airports and motorways before anyone else thought this a problem.

This combination of pragmatism with socio-political vision made Wootton an acknowledged leader throughout the century. Remarkably, aged only 26, she was appointed to sit on the Colwyn Committee on National Debt and Taxation in 1922, helping to decide what to do with the country's huge debts in the fallout of the First World War. (The only woman to be on the committee, she wrote a short piece for *Good Housekeeping* at the time, recommending that women concern themselves with national as well as household budgets, if they weren't to find half their taxes have been spent on the military.) In 1926, *Everywoman* stated 'This is an age when women are coming into their own and we can get inspiration by following the remarkable career of Barbara Wootton. She is even now only 29 years of age, yet she is a considerable figure in the national life, and is, in a sense, the standard-bearer of the new generation'. The Communist *Time and Tide* [2] magazine suspected she wielded 'more power than any other woman in the country', while the *New York Times* called her 'one of the ablest people in England'. In 1958, she was one of the first four life peers, an honour she accepted while seeking to abolish 'this creaking contrivance'. She was a Governor of the BBC and served on four Royal Commissions. In 1971 she was hailed by the *London Illustrated News* as 'a sociological legend in her own lifetime' and in 1984, she was one of six women chosen for the BBC 2 series *Women of Our Century*. She died in 1988 having been forced to retire as Deputy Speaker in the House of Lords when she was 89 years old.

### **Fade to black**

Why, then, is she not a familiar name in the way of, for example, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, or H. G. Wells, with whom she helped launch a new version of an old campaign for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1939? Or J. M. Keynes, alongside whom she presented a BBC broadcast on *The Necessity of Planning* in 1934? Or William Beveridge, for whom she worked as a technical expert in 1943, to help with the practicalities of the post-war reconstruction programme, the year she published her own defence of government-engineered employment schemes? Or, indeed, Richard Titmuss, with whom she shared ideas about the foundation of the NHS? Titmuss was Ann Oakley's father, and one of the most touching moments in the book is Oakley's recall of a colleague's remark that Wootton was 'a more brilliant social analyst' than her father, yet so much less noticed. This fact had 'burnt a small hole in [her] brain', clearly a driver for the biography. This provokes us to ask, more strangely, why haven't other feminists found her before? She ought to be up there with other great women of her generation, peers like Edith Summerskill, Joan Robinson, Dora Russell, Vera Brittain or Eleanor Rathbone. Oakley's explanation is partly that Wootton was not interested in her own marginalisation. If Wootton had been a feminist, she would have been easier for feminists to recuperate. Wootton's mode was also both too idealistic and too empiricist for today's tastes; she was a socialist magistrate and Lord. Or was it because she took on both academia and government – so neither profession really championed her?

From the biographer's point of view too, Wootton defies easy plotting. She was not a poet like Virginia Woolf, nor a recognised creative writer like Winifred Holtby or even Naomi Mitchison, with whom her political visions have much in common. Though she did experiment with science fiction in the 1930s, and

wrote an autobiography in the 1960s, tellingly titled *A World I Never Made* (1967), it was impersonal. She kept a stiff upper lip about her tragedies, beginning with a cruel mother, who apparently cared only for her daughter's academic achievement, and her father's death when she was ten. She lost her brother in the First World War, and then her first husband John (Jack) Wootton in 1917, who died of war wounds only weeks after their marriage. But, though these were terrible traumas, she surprises us by marrying George Wright 17 years later, a working-class socialist in the adult education movement, and then separating from him in middle age. Wootton's subsequent partnership with Barbara Kyle, (a senior librarian and pioneer of information science), does not fit into the script of lesbian heroic history: Wootton continued to enjoy flirting with men, and Oakley surmises that, though the relationship was intimate, it was unlikely to have been sexual.

### **Oakley, biography and history**

Oakley's method in dealing with the puzzles of this civic-minded anti-hero is not to force open the door. Unlike Wootton, Oakley *is* a feminist and makes no bones about the fact that Wootton did all this at a time when women were discriminated against in ways that now seem brutal and absurd. Wootton gained the best first-class degree mark in economics that anyone had ever had, but women were not allowed until 1948 to graduate from Cambridge with degrees. When Wootton became the first woman to lecture at Cambridge in 1921, aged 24, her talks were advertised as being delivered by a 'Mr Henderson' (only a footnote revealed the lecturer's true identity). Wootton was subsequently employed to research the voting system, without herself being eligible to vote. Oakley describes Wootton's entrance to the House of Lords as a bomb exploding in a gentlemen's club of arcane upper-class rituals and bald, sleeping men. But, as Wootton herself put it, these were only the corridors of the corridors that lead to the corridors of power. And then there are the subtler questions of alienation that Oakley suggests kept Wootton out of the academic establishment, that disdained her relationship with George and Barbara, that prevented her from being a mother. We certainly feel the terrible wrongness of Wootton's lonely and ignominious death in a nursing home.

Oakley appreciates these ironies, but restrains the temptation towards psycho-biography, or even towards a kind of feminist life writing which would have given more space to the emotions. (Interestingly, the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham found the book a little lacking in this respect.) As the foreword by Baroness Tessa Blackstone also conveys, she emphasises the public, intellectual life, including a brilliant set of core chapters on Wootton as part of a mid-century left-wing intelligentsia, 'Planning for peace'; 'Lament for economics', 'Testament for social science' and 'The Nuffield years, and Vera'. In this, Oakley also refuses contemporary biographical fashion, avoiding autobiography or fictionalisation. The chapters which do chart Wootton's domestic situation, remain crisply analytical. This is refreshing in its own way, and part of what makes the book so historically informative. For example, Oakley treats Wootton's second marriage as an erotic meeting of equals across class lines in a context of shared political activism in the 1930s. Oakley also sees the disappointment of the relationship, as George messes up his Labour Party job, drinks, pursues other women, and essentially crumbles in the face of the frighteningly capable and economically powerful Wootton. But Oakley considers their relationship through feminist anthropological prisms, where polygamy and friendship are often the secret story of successful marriage, and where, simultaneously, George's style of masculinity doesn't, in the end, serve him any better than Barbara. Oakley refuses to titillate, trying instead 'to set the story of her life within its context; particularly in a life such as hers, which was so much occupied with the problem of the individual *in* society' (p. 7). Oakley jokes about her own insistence on calling the book *A Critical Woman*, rather than 'The Baroness Who Married A Taxi Driver', as the newspapers chose to cover it at the time of the marriage. The book jacket features a close-up of a white-haired and serious Wootton, throwing us a demanding, old woman's gaze from behind horn-rimmed glasses.

Thus, Oakley faithfully follows her subject's policy-flavoured life and in this way, easily turns biography into a grandish intellectual history. Of course, in this she refuses the methods of micro-history, *Annales*-school social study, or the now popular model of 'paired' or collective lives. The book is also long: over 400 pages, as she traces the footsteps of this polymath's 91 productive years. The sheer size of Wootton's

contribution (the 1,792 speeches in the House of Lords alone, numerous television debates) required four years of archival research and interviews, including with Vera Seal, Barbara's only 'family' by the time she died. Vera was a working-class assistant, enduring friend and executor, to whom Oakley dedicates the biography. It is an interesting thought experiment to imagine what Oakley, well known for conceptualising feminist interviewing methods, would have been able to glean from Wootton in person. Despite Oakley's obvious respect for her subject, the meeting would probably have been cool. Oakley, introduced to the grand dame aged 13 by her father, remembers a witty know-all. Yet the book clearly comes from a profound impulse to find the woman who should always have been honoured beside him.

### **Who is Ann Oakley?**

As a woman born half a century later, from a different social background, and politicised in the 1960s, Oakley as a biographer brings her own very wide ranging set of interests to this honouring. Who coined the distinction between sex and gender in 1972? Who set up the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London? Who, as Director of the Social Science Research Unit there, led systematic reviews of health inequality and hugely influenced the ethics of social science methods? Who stuck out for evidence-based research in a sea of deconstructionists? Who went on television to be interviewed as a post-natally depressed mother in 1967? Who belonged to the Tufnell Park women's liberation consciousness-raising group? Who gained a PhD in 1969 for a study of women's attitudes to housework that then became both a landmark academic and popular book in the era of second wave feminism in 1974? Who worked with Juliet Mitchell to mark the concept of sisterhood over three decades since? Who did the first big study of the treatment of mothers by the medical profession, published in 1980? Who did this despite having been treated for cancer of the tongue, while nursing a new born baby, in the years just preceding? Who wrote *The Men's Room* (1989), adapted for television in 1991, starring Harriet Walter and Bill Nighy? Who indeed has produced seven novels, including some artful erotica, alongside at least 15 groundbreaking academic studies? Who also wrote a genre-busting feminist autofiction in 1984, which declared 'All women are feminists at heart. In their psychology lies a great love for women as a class. But it's interred beneath a great mound of rubbish'. And who, of course, has now brought Wootton back to our attention, a woman we can now assess as having had played a serious part in the history of modern Britain as we know it?

### **The impact of the individual**

Oakley gives numerous examples of Wootton's search for the facts before recommending any course of action, an approach with which Oakley clearly agrees. But what do these two formidable defenders of 'evidence-based research' say about the impact of the individual, or even of the policy committee? As left-wing social scientists, they might not be very hopeful. Yet this book persuades us that ideas like Wootton's were much more likely to gain purchase than those of her academic contemporaries because of her willingness to engage with the institutions available. This realism brought no guarantees: Oakley recently suggested the political control over intellectual impact, noting Wootton's experience of having been lauded for her criminal justice policy for rehabilitating offenders, but slammed for her (just as evidence-heavy) drugs policy. The crucial role of networks, of international collaboration, and of accessible writing, all appear as other determinants of 'impact factor', most strikingly in Wootton's influence over the European Union. This came about because the Italian political theorist Altiero Spinelli read her ideas on European federation while he was imprisoned by Mussolini in 1941, subsequently smuggling out a manifesto on cigarette papers hidden in a false bottomed-tin box. Oakley muses: 'The number and range of activities and networks with which Barbara Wootton engaged during this period [of post-war planning in the 1940s] is legion. It could, of course, be argued that she was just a woman who had a finger in a very large number of pies. It was a habit of the time to sign letters with one's friends; to invent and join campaigns; to name and re-name movements. But we are left with one simple point: she was there, and she made a difference. By the time Barbara published her autobiography more than twenty years later, complaining in its title about a world she never made, it is possible that she was in part observing that the world had forgotten how much she actually *had* made it'.

We do not have to endorse a Hegelian notion of the great mind as 'spirit of the age' to appreciate that Barbara Wootton's life is a missing piece of a puzzle, with much to teach contemporary academics who wish to find a way through the current government pressure to prove our own 'impact'. This is not to say that the biographer, the fiction writer, and also, the librarian, typist, executor and friend, have no role: we are connected, we need each other, and we are sometimes the same person, as Oakley shows us quietly, but wonderfully. It does leave us, however, with the continuing irony that having impact does not guarantee you will make it into the history books.

#### **Other reviews:**

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417258.article> [3]

LSE Review of Books

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2012/04/01/book-review-a-critical-woman-barbara-wootton-social-science-and-public-policy-in-the-twentieth-century-by-ann-oakley/> [4]

Camden New Journal

<http://www.camdennewjournal.com/reviews/books/2011/nov/books-review-critical-woman-barbara-wootton-social-science-and-public-policy-> [5]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1395>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/54650>

[2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time\\_and\\_Tide\\_%28magazine%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_and_Tide_%28magazine%29)

[3] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417258.article>

[4] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2012/04/01/book-review-a-critical-woman-barbara-wootton-social-science-and-public-policy-in-the-twentieth-century-by-ann-oakley/>

[5] <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/reviews/books/2011/nov/books-review-critical-woman-barbara-wootton-social-science-and-public-policy->