

Review Article

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Besprekingsartikel

Robert Eales, *The Compassionate Englishwoman: Emily Hobhouse in the Boer War*

UCT Press, Claremont, 2015

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Elsabe Brits, *Emily Hobhouse: Beloved Traitor*

Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2016

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Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, *Living the Love: Emily Hobhouse Post-War (1918–1926)*

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“A hysterical spinster of mature age”:¹

Some reflections on recent biographies of Emily Hobhouse

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Abstract

While the first (auto)biography of the heroine of the Afrikaner people, Emily Hobhouse was published a mere three years after her death in 1929, and a steady stream has followed since, in the last three years or so there has been a remarkable

1. This description of Hobhouse was made by Joseph Chamberlain, the British secretary of state for the colonies in 1901.

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resurgence in popular accounts of her life and work. This review essay profiles three of the latest biographies written by Robert Eales, Elsabe Brits and Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, and variously examines her role in the South African War and her ideas on pacifism, war and politics.

Keywords: Emily Hobhouse; South African War; humanitarianism; First World War; Tibbie Steyn; Jan Smuts.

Opsomming:

Die eerste (outo)biografie van Emily Hobhouse, die heldin van die Afrikaners, is 'n skamele drie jaar na haar dood in 1929 gepubliseer. Talle soortgelyke publikasies het sedertdien verskyn en in die laaste sowat drie jaar was daar 'n opmerklieke toename in populêre vertellings van Hobhouse se lewe en werk. Hierdie besprekingsartikel bied 'n blik op drie van die jongste biografieë, geskryf deur Robert Eales, Elsabe Brits en Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, terwyl dit ook haar rol in die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog en haar idees oor pasifisme, oorlog en politiek opnuut ondersoek.

Slutelwoorde: Emily Hobhouse; Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog; filantropie; Eerste Wêreldoorlog; Tibbie Steyn; Jan Smuts.

On 11 June 1926, a handful of people gathered at St Mary Abbots church in Kensington, at the funeral of Emily Hobhouse. Since the end of the previous century, Hobhouse worked as an indefatigable humanitarian campaigner, maintaining a particularly close attachment to South Africa. It scarcely bears repeating but in this country, and indeed throughout the world, Hobhouse is best known for revealing the deleterious conditions in the British camps in the South African War. Following the conclusion of the conflict she became deeply involved in the reconstruction of the country, setting up spinning and weaving schools across the Orange Free State and latterly the Transvaal, alongside maintaining close personal relationships (particularly through her extensive letter-writing networks) with figures such as Jan Smuts, Betty Molteno and Isabella “Tibbie” Steyn. Profoundly committed to pacifism, Hobhouse spent the majority of the early twentieth century campaigning against war, and organising relief for those affected by war. Reviled and revered in equal measure, to many of her South African devotees, her muted funeral belied her importance as a humanitarian campaigner and ceaseless agitator for the good of their country. Some five months later, therefore, Hobhouse was afforded a state funeral in South Africa, with all the accompanying pomp and ceremony; and her ashes were interred at the foot of the Women’s Monument in Bloemfontein, an impressive edifice designed some 13 years earlier by the sculptor, Anton von Wouw.²

2. For more on the contested meanings of the Women’s Monument see E. Cloete, “Writing of(f) the Women of the National Women’s Monument”, *Literator*, 20, 3 (1999), pp 35–50; A. Grundlingh, “The National Women’s Monument: The Making and Mutations of Meaning in Afrikaner Memory of the South African War”, in G. Cuthbertson, A. Grundlingh and M-L. Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking*

While the first (auto)biography of Hobhouse was published only three years after her death, and a steady stream has followed since, in the last three years or so there has been a remarkable resurgence in popular accounts of her life and work.³ Her exploits during the South African War, or as some still insist, the Anglo-Boer War, are best known and it is this part of her life that continues to attract the greatest attention.⁴ Robert Eales' *Compassionate Englishwoman* follows this tradition. Equal parts military history and biography, this book is as much a rehearsal of the history of the South African War and the perfidious nature of British imperialism as it is a study of Hobhouse.

Beginning with her 1900 voyage from Southampton to Cape Town, there is a certain breathless, but ultimately readable quality to this book, as it recounts her tireless attempts to publicise the plight of, and raise funds for the women and children interned in British prisoner of war camps. Structured by the way of a staggering 32 chapters, and written in four parts, Eales animates some aspects of Hobhouse's life following the death of her father in 1895. As the spinster aunt now free of caring duties, Hobhouse turned her attention in earnest to the professional politicking for which she is well known. Following a stay in North America (where she initially travelled to promote the temperance movement amongst Cornish miners), including the making and breaking of an engagement, and the loss of substantial funds in an ill-fated ranch purchase, Hobhouse returned to Britain to spend considerable time with her uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Hobhouse.

Shortly after the outbreak of the South African War, she became involved in the South African Conciliation Committee, becoming the honorary secretary of the women's branch before going on to found the South African Women and Children Distress Fund. These events form the backdrop to the opening 30 or so pages of *The Compassionate Englishwoman* where Eales underlines that "nothing in Emily's background hints at the remarkable things she did later" (p 32). Although she was a woman of relatively modest financial means, Eales' assertion fails to give due attention to the many personal connections she mobilised in the cause of her

Gender, Race and Identity in the South African War, 1899–1902 (Ohio University Press, Athens, 2002), pp 18–36.

3. See, inter alia, F.H. Beer, *The Angel of Love: Emily Hobhouse, 1860–1926* (Charaton Books, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002); R. Fry, *Emily Hobhouse: A Memoir* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1929); J. Hall, *That Bloody Woman: The Turbulent Life of Emily Hobhouse, Cornwall's Forgotten Heroine* (Truran Press, Cornwall, 2008); J. Hobhouse Balme, *To Love One's Enemies: The Work and Life of Emily Hobhouse* (ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart, 2012); J. Hobhouse Balme, *Agent of Peace: Emily Hobhouse and her Courageous Attempts to End the First World War* (The History Press, Stroud, 2015).
4. I am puzzled why Eales only notes the two different names used for the war when she is 46 pages into the book.

humanitarian work, and indeed the privileged background from which she came.⁵ If anything, her continual ability to marshal resources through her personal connections allowed her to translate her brand of humanitarianism into direct political action – something that this book could have made more of.

One thing Eales does do well, is capture the great enmity that Hobhouse aroused in men such as Lord Kitchener. Despite his misgivings, it was quite remarkable for Kitchener to “allow Emily to visit the camps in the southern part of the war zone” (p 36), and although I am unconvinced by the assertion that the conditions in the camps occurred because Kitchener was “a childless bachelor” (p 73), Eales does note how her experiences of the camps changed her irrevocably (p 78, p 133). Though not cut from quite the same political cloth as the suffragettes who believed in “deeds not words”, in the third section of the book, Eales creates a convincing and easily digestible narrative of how Hobhouse sought to undertake practical action to highlight, and then improve the conditions of the camps.⁶ In particular, Hobhouse marshalled her contacts among Britain’s liberal intelligentsia (including John Morley, William Harcourt and David Lloyd George), using their patronage and political clout to try and gain acceptance for (what was subsequently considered) her highly controversial report on the conditions in the British camps.⁷ As Eales notes, “first a screamer, then a meddler, now Emily had been promoted to agitator” (p 180). Despite being rounded on by the establishment press, Hobhouse “raised the issue of the camps to national prominence” (p 200). The news that Millicent Garrett Fawcett had been chosen by the British government to lead a “Ladies” delegation to inspect the camps was both pleasing and galling to Hobhouse.⁸ While the women shared a complex, adversarial acquaintance, Hobhouse was at least gratified that some action, albeit slow and trundling, was underway. Ultimately, Fawcett’s report vindicated everything in the early piece written by Hobhouse, yet recommendations from the latter’s report saw that the “credit for the reduction in camp fatalities went mostly to the Ladies’ Committee” (p 223).

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5. In addition, as students and practitioners fond of the methods of “history from below” will attest, seemingly “ordinary” people have often gone on to achieve great feats. For more on history from below see E. Hobsbawm, “History from Below: Some Reflections”, in F. Krantz (ed.), *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rude* (Concordia University Press, Montreal, 1985). For an example of pioneering South African social history see C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894–1985* (Hill & Wang, New York, 1997).
 6. For an introduction to the history of the British suffrage movement see H.L. Smith, *The British Women’s Suffrage Campaign, 1866–1928* (Longmans, London, 1998).
 7. There is a certain irony that when the recommendations of her report were discussed in parliament in June 1901, Hobhouse, its architect, could only observe the deliberations from the public gallery.
 8. For more on Fawcett and her role in the British suffrage movement, see D. Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1991).

The final substantive chapters of *The Compassionate Englishwoman* concentrate on Hobhouse's abortive attempts to make a second visit to South Africa, where she intended to undertake tours of the country's port cities. As is widely known, Hobhouse was forcibly prevented from disembarking from the *Avondale Castle* once it reached Cape Town – under direct orders from Kitchener and Milner, and was unceremoniously ordered to return to Southampton thereafter. Following this, Eales' narrative turns to offer a postscript on the camps, and indeed a brief summary of Emily's life until her death in 1926. In many ways, I think both these chapters would have worked better as part of an epilogue, because they tend to undermine the pace and dramatic prose of the rest of the book. As Eales notes in the acknowledgments, "this is a popular rather than academic account" (p 288) – and on this basis the book succeeds. Yet, for those looking to read a non-partisan account of the South African War, and indeed to understand Hobhouse's involvement in a wider international context, this book would not be an obvious first choice.

However, if the inchoate enthusiast were to buy just one book to deepen his or her knowledge, then it should be Elsabe Brits's very fine *Emily Hobhouse: Beloved Traitor*. Brits, a well-known South African journalist, has produced a detailed and expansive summary of Hobhouse's life and work, one that generally manages to stay on the right side of hagiographic. Published by Tafelberg, this is a cleverly designed and attractive book, written with a wide readership in mind. Although the prose is quite small, and the layout might be too florid for some, the book is littered with a many letters, drawings, portraits and illustrations of Hobhouse and her circle. Brits's lively and engaging writing style guides the reader from Emily's birth in 1860, to the interment of her ashes at the Women's Monument in 1926. While the majority of this book is concerned with Hobhouse's activities in, and relation to South Africa (not surprising considering the target market for this publication), over the course of 23 chapters and 300 pages Brits makes serious strides to place Hobhouse's activities into a wider international context. Inspired by reading Rykie van Reenen's *Heldin uit de Vreemde* (1970),⁹ *Beloved Traitor* is the result of research carried out with what remains of Hobhouse's private papers (formerly in the possession of Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, and shortly to be made available to researchers at the University of Oxford), alongside material held in a variety of archives including the largely underutilised Free State Archive Repository.

Beginning with her family tree, although not explicitly, Brits establishes the privileged background from whence Hobhouse came. Time is taken to explore Victorian attitudes towards women and their supposed (un)suitability for the public sphere, with the titular heroine not being able to enjoy the privileges of formal schooling. Given the moniker "the missus" as a small child (which neatly captures, what was at times, her propensity for bossiness) Brits does well in animating Hobhouse's life before her involvement in humanitarian activity. Although sent to a finishing school, judicious use is made of Hobhouse's letters that convey her frustration and ennui with her early life (p 16). As many other biographers have

9. R. van Reenen, *Heldin uit de Vreemde* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1970).

noted, it was at the age of 35 when “Emily had shaken the dust of St Ives off her feet and was intent on seeing the world” (p 26), that she first truly began to transgress contemporary notions of the role of women in public life.¹⁰

Like biographers before her, Brits recounts Hobhouse’s involvement in the South African War. Although a great deal of this information has been covered elsewhere, chapters three to seven provide a comprehensive account of this period. In the spring of 1902, a period of convalescence in the South of France led to writing of *The Brunt of the War and Where it Fell*, which appeared shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging in May of the same year (pp 96–97). In writing to Hobhouse about the book’s publication, Olive Schreiner opined: “I consider you did more effective and useful in the cause of humanity and justice in South Africa than any other individual has been able to do. You saved not hundreds but undoubtedly thousands of lives” (p 104). Despite this high praise, Hobhouse’s reputation was never entirely rehabilitated in the British public imagination – an issue that was further compounded by her tour of Germany during the course of the First World War. Hobhouse, however, remained unbowed. Setting sail for Cape Town in April 1903 aboard the *Carisbrooke Castle*, she was concerned with translating her knowledge of the war and its effects into practical efforts during the country’s reconstruction.

Chapter nine, one of the standout sections in the book, details Hobhouse’s tour of a multitude of *dorpiés* including Boshof, Hoopstad, Roosenekal and Belfast – with a helpful map showing the extent of her travels (p 137). Moving on to Pretoria in July, Hobhouse stayed at the home of Jan and Isie Smuts, with the visit being “the start of a long and close friendship” between them (p 123). While Smuts’s relative political liberalism is overplayed in this section, Brits does detail the importance of the connection accurately. Among Smuts’s papers (which are held at the national archives in Pretoria), there are thousands of letters from Hobhouse that provide information on the ebbs and flows (for more on an ebb, see chapter ten) of their 25-year friendship.

One of Hobhouse’s responses to the desolation wrought by the war was to “teach young girls in the country districts spinning and weaving” – something which manifested itself as the Boer Home Industries Scheme (p 146). Her idea was thus: teach young Boer women to make lace and spin cloth – the fruits of which could then be sold – with the profits thereby kick-starting the many communities she visited during her tour of the country. Chapters eleven to thirteen examine the trials, tribulations and modest success that the scheme enjoyed, as well as capturing

10. The idea of separate spheres, public being male and private being female, remained incredibly influential in this period. It was only from the 1960s onwards, with the rise of women’s history as a discipline, that feminist scholars began to dismantle this idea – showing that this binary was historically produced not biologically determined. There is a voluminous literature on this subject, but one of the classic texts remains L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Longman, London, 1987).

Hobhouse's somewhat irascible attitude to the deputies in the enterprise (p 154). Despite her high-mindedness, the home industries scheme, like the ploughing plan before it, demonstrates her deep desire to translate her beliefs and principles into practical action. Chapter thirteen also discusses her attitudes towards female enfranchisement and her guidance of Anton von Wouw's sculpture that eventually adorned the women's monument – a 35-foot obelisk in Bloemfontein that commemorates the lives of Boer women and children lost during the conflict. Being asked to speak at the opening of the monument in 1913, Hobhouse found she was too ill to do so – but her long treatise (p 208–212) was read anyway. If there is one chapter that feels undercooked, it is chapter fifteen, the one that details her contact with Mahatma Gandhi – which is only two pages long. A firmer editor would have either culled it or suggested it be lengthened!

While her connection to South Africa remained a constant feature of her life, in the final third of the book Brits shifts her attention to war in Europe. As Hobhouse's activities after 1914 are less well known, it is here that this book begins to map new ground. Although her position as a pacifist remained controversial, war in Europe saw further personal tribulations for her because she disagreed with both her brother Leonard, and with Smuts, on the legitimacy of military conflict in Europe.

Further displaying her knack for inserting herself forcibly where she was not wanted, and raising the ire of the state (as she had done in the South African War) she was labelled a "peace crank" by the British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey (p 232), and her passport was withdrawn (in May 1916) because she visited Bern to meet Baron von Romberg, the German ambassador, Determined not to have her plans short-circuited, she persuaded von Romberg to assist her in obtaining a humanitarian passport that would allow her to "see the war-time living conditions" of civilians in Belgium and Germany.

Two things occur to one when reading this account: While Hobhouse was untiring in her efforts to report on the effects of war (with the aim of ultimately cajoling the British to end the conflict), she was guilty of making a spectacular misjudgement of the influence she would be able to exert; and indeed, that her brand of pacifist humanitarian action would finally be taken seriously by the British authorities. Summoned to the British consulate in Bern (as chapter eighteen tells us) she was ultimately labelled a traitor. Dismissed by those in her inner circle (p 254 gives details of Smuts's particularly damning comments), a less resolute woman would surely have ended her politicking; not so for Hobhouse. Deeply influenced by her experiences in South Africa, she knew that "in the aftermath of war, famine, disease and poverty" were often rife (p 255). She determined to continue her direct action, this time the distribution of food amongst the schoolchildren of Europe including a wide-scale relief programme in Leipzig.

The last three chapters chart Hobhouse's dotage, including the beginnings of her unfinished autobiography, and the purchase of a house in St Warren, Cornwall, thanks to Tibbie Steyn making "a nationwide appeal in the press to repay a debt of

honour to the angel of the concentration camps” (p 268). Chapter 23 attempts to provide an assessment of Hobhouse’s character and this is perhaps slightly redundant, because the author does this with subtlety throughout the preceding 300 pages of the book. Despite a few typos and translation problems (e.g. p 16, p 92 and p 178), to date this is the best single biography on Hobhouse. *Beloved Traitor* has garnered widespread praise, and rightly so. Put together ostensibly for a public audience, this does not belie the rigorous research on which it is based nor its academic value to scholars of southern African, humanitarian and women’s history.

If Brits is now the best known Hobhouse aficionado, she must surely share the title with Hobhouse’s great niece, Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, who perhaps more than anyone else in recent years, has endeavoured to keep the memory of her great-aunt alive. Preceded by *To Love One’s Enemies* (2012) and *Agent of Peace* (2015), *Living the Love* is therefore the final instalment in Hobhouse Blame’s trilogy of books about the exploits of her aunt.¹¹ Ostensibly a collection that draws together Hobhouse’s own post-war letters into one volume, this book sits somewhere between an edited source collection and a conventional biography. It begins rather oddly with a throw-away sentence, before the foreword, about Hobhouse’s relationship to Gandhi. The author then lays bare her intention to write a recuperative history as “she [Emily Hobhouse] is not as well known in Britain as she deserves to be”. Structured by way of twelve chapters, the “prelude” helpfully sketches the important events in Hobhouse’s life before the conclusion of the Great War. This book, however, is not the obvious choice for the uninitiated because there is very little in the way of scaffolding that explains the broader context and importance of the material within the reproduced letters.

Although Hobhouse continued her epistolary dialogue with important international figures such as Smuts, during the post-war period she also continued her own brand of humanitarian politicking, becoming involved in the Russian Babies Fund, and setting up the fund in Aid of Swiss Relief for Starving Children (pp 12–16).¹² Aghast by what she felt was the Treaty of Versailles’ punitive peace, chapter two examines her attempts to mobilise wider international networks, particularly with regard to a clause of the treaty which laid down that Germany had to give 140 000 cows to France and Belgium. Worried that German children would now “forego fresh milk” (p 21), she attempted to enlist the help of the Save the Children Fund, as well as writing to Jane Addams (a prominent US Quaker and humanitarian who was working with Herbert Hoover regarding the feeding of children), as well as imploring Lord Curzon, Lloyd George and C.P. Scott (editor of the *Manchester Guardian*) to join her efforts to relieve the hardships suffered by the starving children of continental Europe.

The reader is struck by the thought that unlike Jane Addams, who enjoyed public recognition for her humanitarian work, Hobhouse was certainly not as well

11. Hobhouse Balme, *To Love One’s Enemies*.

12. For more on the Russian Babies Fund, see K. Storr, *Excluded from the Record: Women, Refugees, and Relief, 1914–1929* (Peter Lang, Bern, 2010).

regarded, and that she was advocating from the margins, not from the centre of political action (for instance, she complained that Scott no longer published her letters to *The Manchester Guardian*, pp 37–38).¹³ Impatient for action, and now with funds from Save the Children, chapter four details the beginnings of her mass feeding schemes for European children, as well as the sending of fat to “prominent” women in Berlin (generally members of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom), who Hobhouse believed could exercise a significant role in righting relations between Germany and England (p 48).

Courted by German nobility in recognition of the importance of her feeding schemes, it seems that it was in continental Europe, rather than England, that Hobhouse received the credit she desired (p 68). Through funds raised via Save the Children, her own personal connections, and a £350 cheque raised by Tibbie Steyn in South Africa (p 59), Hobhouse’s schemes were able to distribute a staggering 1 873 537 meals to needy children (p 75). In addition to these funds, Tibbie Steyn also placed a special appeal in the local press, asking for donations of half a crown towards the cost of building a retirement home for Hobhouse in England. Chapter eight details Hobhouse’s subsequent house hunt and the purchase of Warren House. Chapter eight also contains some brief and oblique references to race and racial segregation (p 101) before ending with a series of photographs. The remainder of the book covers Hobhouse’s letters to Smuts; the establishment of the Hobhouse Foundation; and her views on the hung parliament in the 1923 British general election. As someone who has read large chunks of Hobhouse’s letters, I was surprised that more was not made of her declining health – something that she discussed in virtually every letter! A week before she died she wrote her final letter to Tibbie Steyn (p 148), in which she wrote that she wished to receive some recognition for her life’s work.

In summation, *Living the Love* is not an easy read. It assumes great prior knowledge, and it is difficult to switch between large swathes of reproduced letters and note-like prose. However, when it is read alongside Hobhouse Balme’s earlier books it becomes, a little easier to digest. Hobhouse Balme is to be congratulated for keeping the memory of her aunt alive, and for her careful preservation of her remaining papers.

Although much has been, and will no doubt continue to be written, about Hobhouse’s role in South African affairs and the South African War, the great majority of existing works (Brits’s book aside) still fall short in offering new ways to think through her role as letter writer, private politician and humanitarian. A heroine of the Afrikaner people *par excellence*, there is much still to be written about her deification, particularly with regards to the hotly contested politics of public memory in post-apartheid society. In the coming years, it would be good to see a new generation of scholars and popular writers expending their energy on doing just this; for now, I

13. For more on Addams, see J. Weber Lin, *Jane Addams: A Biography* (University of Illinois Press, Champaign, 1935).

can't help but feel that we only know half the story of surely one of the most unrelenting humanitarians of the twentieth century.

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