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INTRODUCTION

Writing a Life of Barbara Wootton

Barbara Wootton's work and life are remembered by only a few people today. Her name is not one that conjures up a notable record of public achievement, even though this was the nature of her work, in her lifetime, which spanned the greater part of the twentieth century (1897–1988). Her name is, for example, the answer to the following questions: Who first suggested community service as an alternative to imprisonment in Britain? Who chaired a commission on drugs policy which recommended fundamental changes in the law in 1968? Who succeeded in getting the Bill to abolish capital punishment through the House of Lords and on to the statute book in 1965? Who set up a campaign to persuade the Government of the time to adopt the principles of the 1942 Beveridge Report and establish the welfare state? Who was the first woman to give University lectures in Cambridge in 1921, 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, curtail the unrestricted development of airports and motorways, and treat crime on the roads as equal in severity to crime in other places? Who was the first Chair of the Countryside Commission? Who was a founder member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the British Humanist Association, the British Sociological Association and the first modern movement for human rights? Whose contributions to the movement for a federation of countries committed to world peace underpinned the development of the European Community? Who wrote the first sustained critique in English of the deficits of traditional economic theory, 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 put forward new theories about the role of intent and of punishment in the criminal

justice system? Who took the first systematic look at theories about the causes of anti-social behaviour in young people, challenged the tendency of professionals to assume the role of expert, and helped to establish a new critique of medicalization as a damaging process which strips us of our autonomy and moral responsibility? Who was the first academic and policy activist to argue seriously that policies designed to promote human welfare must be based on sound scientific evidence, and that social research, as a significant endeavour feeding the policy process, ought to concern itself with systematic understandings of human behaviour?

This biography begins with a paradox: that such a tremendous record of achievement should be so forgotten. It is the first full-length account of Barbara Wootton's life and work.¹ People's posthumous reputations are a notoriously poor guide to the nature of their living contributions. It is thus sometimes the self-appointed task of biographers to rescue people from unjustified anonymity – from what historian E.P. Thompson called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.² But that was not my original motive for researching and writing *A Critical Woman*. As a social scientist, I had used Barbara Wootton's work, particularly her book *The Social Foundations of Wage Policy*, which I read as an economics student in the early 1960s, and her *Social Science and Social Pathology*, which came into its own when I was trying, in the early 1990s, to establish a culture within social research of systematic evidence reviews. Through her publications, I had developed a deep respect for her intellect and her rationality, and for the way in which she harnessed these to the dissection and treatment of social problems; I was impressed by her constant, reasoned refusal to be taken in by grand theory or professional arrogance. She believed that people are the experts on their own lives. She did not believe that long words and technical vocabularies are aids to understanding. Along with this – and entirely consistent with it – was her passion for democracy and for social and economic equality. She was too radical to act as the spokesperson of any one political party. Her thinking, and her contributions to social science and to public policy, were lateral and diverse: she crossed boundaries, and re-crossed them, argued that they should not exist, and thus perpetually and valuably provoked people into reassessing their own positions.

My fascination with her mind and its impact on social science and public policy led me to want to know more about the person and her work. There was a personal connection too: my father, Professor Richard Titmuss, was a colleague of Barbara Wootton's when she headed a social studies department at the University of London in the 1950s. I recall her coming to dinner in our house in London, and I remember being taken to see her in her house in the country, where she lived with two donkeys. I did not warm to her; she had rather a formidable presence and to a child (I was thirteen) she did not seem easily approachable. Fifty years passed between

that meeting and the time I decided I wanted to write a biography of her. Much, obviously, had happened during that half-century, to her, to me and to the society in which we lived. The greater part of her achievements came after the mid-1950s. I went on to study economics, like her, and then discover social science, again like her. Many years further on, and in the course of trying to map the development of one branch of social science – what was then called ‘medical sociology’ – I came across an account by Margot Jefferys, a sociologist who worked with Barbara Wootton at Bedford College in London during the early 1950s. Margot also knew my father, in the shadow of whose quite considerable reputation I had grown up. Describing Barbara as ‘iconoclastic, clear-minded and coldly witty’, Margot went on to make an observation which burnt a small hole in my brain: Barbara Wootton’s reputation, she said, was so much less than Richard Titmuss’s, yet ‘she was a more brilliant social analyst than he’.³ This remark made me think hard about the circumstances which allow some people’s achievements to be noticed, and others not. For anyone who has pondered the mysteries of gender, this is hardly a new question. It was one I took with me through the process of writing *A Critical Woman*.

My sense, as a thirteen-year-old, of Barbara Wootton as not an easily approachable person, proved to be an early warning of my task as a biographer. The material records a person leaves behind are a footprint of character as well as the way life was lived. Barbara Wootton was a private person – she did not talk easily about her emotions and her private life. She also did not care much for history. Her concerns were for the present, and about how the present can be helped by learning from the past. These traits of character are reflected in the fact that she made no provision for her literary estate, she made no plans about where her papers would be lodged after her death, and she left a very partial record of her life. Without the careful guidance of Vera Seal, Barbara’s longtime colleague, friend and personal assistant, there might well have been no Barbara Wootton archives at all; as it is, the 237 files of papers, newspaper cuttings, correspondence and photographs in the library of Girton College, Cambridge, are as notable for what they do not contain as for what they do. According to Barbara’s solicitor, much was destroyed in her lifetime.⁴ For example, there are no diaries in the Girton archives, and relatively few personal letters; there is no correspondence with her parents, or with either of her husbands. This suggests that she did not entertain the possibility that someone might want to write her biography. When asked once how she wanted to be remembered, she said she did not particularly want to be remembered at all, but, if she were, it should be ‘as a person who tried hard for what she thought were good causes. And what I hope other people will think are good causes, and there will still be people who think they’re good causes even when I’m dead and gone.’⁵

There is no need to read undue modesty into this statement: Barbara Wootton was an intensely pragmatic and realistic person, and the sentiments she expressed here follow the course of a life that really did have the promotion of 'good causes' at its centre. Perhaps she was ambivalent about being the subject of a biography – her reputation for clear thinking co-exists with a much less obvious talent for ambivalence. But it *was* something she did seriously consider. When she got to know the writer Tony Gould in the last years of her life, she asked him to write her biography. In 1985, he decided to agree. He wrote to Penguin Books to ask whether they would commission a volume in their series *Lives of Modern Women*, but their answer was no: they had a full set of titles already, and were worried about Barbara Wootton's appeal to an American audience.⁶ She herself wrote an account of the first seventy years of her life, *In a World I Never Made*, published in 1967, but this is a judicious selection from the available material, and it does not cover the twenty years of activity that were still to come. Several reviewers of the book noted that the silences and gaps in it spoke volumes. There is also a sense in the autobiography, for anyone at all familiar with Barbara Wootton's work and life, of a manufactured story; of an account that has been tailored in various ways to fit with a particular interpretation. This is an inevitable feature of autobiographies, as it is also, to some extent, but differently, of biographies.

There is no such thing as an authentic story of someone's life. There are stories about lives, which can be authenticated in various ways, but the life-writer who pursues the phantasm of truth has given herself or himself an impossible task. To any social researcher, this is a familiar difficulty. Our strategies for building a knowledge base about the workings of the social world rest on two conflicting obligations: to reflect that world in as accurate a way as possible; and to respect all the different perspectives and positions that contribute to it. Although biography is an evidence-based enterprise, there are inevitably choices to be made between different versions of 'the facts'. 'Biography is not *the* representation but the re-making, not the reconstruction but the construction, in written form of a life.'⁷ The interpretive act, or series of acts, through which lives are constructed involves a process which is very like the 'triangulation' used by qualitative social researchers. You take one account and put it next to another, and then the next one; you look at the context and consider what makes the most sense.

The data relating to Barbara Wootton's life that I collected and drew on to examine in this way began with the Girton College Archives, and her published writings and other public outputs. Between 1919, when she emerged from her Classics and economics studies at Girton College, until two years before she died aged ninety-one in 1988, there is an unbroken record of policy and academic

work and publications. Barbara Wootton was a communicator as well as a parliamentarian and a policy analyst and a magistrate and a professor of social studies and a baroness and an economist and all the other things she was; perhaps, above all else, she was a communicator. She wrote enormously, though also in a very precisely guided way, about all the subjects in which she was interested; her main audiences were not academic ones, but policy and practice circles, and the public whose lives were affected by whatever was at issue. She wrote for daily and Sunday newspapers, for journals such as *Adult Education*, *Agenda*, *Common Sense*, *The Freethinker*, *The Highway*, *New Society*, *The Political Quarterly*, the *Probation Journal*, and *Social Service*, as well as for more standard outlets such as *The Economic Journal*, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *The British Journal of Sociology* and the *British Medical Journal*. She was a broadcaster and, for a time, what was known as a ‘television personality’: ‘the Baroness who married a taxi-driver’, who went on ‘The Brains Trust’, and ‘Any Questions?’, and ‘Question Time’, and ‘Man Alive’, and ‘Your Witness’ and ‘Panorama’ and ‘Tonight’, and entertained them all with her sage witticisms and down-to-earth commonsense. I read almost all her writings, and listened to or watched some of her media appearances, but I did not read all the 1,792 contributions she made to House of Lords debates – had I done so, this book is unlikely ever to have materialized. Beyond Barbara Wootton’s own outputs, I searched other people’s archives; I read the social, economic and political literature of the period; I interrogated biographies and autobiographies relating to people she knew and worked with; and, most importantly, I was fortunate to be able to interview and talk informally to some of the people who knew her. The result of all this was an enormous quantity of material: the ‘raw data’ – messy, unclassified and sometimes unclassifiable, contradictory on occasion, often repetitive. Of course it has proved impossible to include everything in the book; my file of ‘things to put in somewhere’ remains substantial. I was also making new discoveries until the last minute – for example, about Barbara Wootton’s contentious record as a road safety campaigner, and about her efforts in the 1940s to increase government investment in social science research – and I have no doubt that more time would have yielded more such treasures. This book, like Barbara Wootton’s life, has the status of a work in progress. Nonetheless, I hope it gives the main areas of her work the space they deserve.

As I collected all this material, I became increasingly conscious of a contradiction between its volume, on the one hand, and the difficulty of accessing the private side of Barbara Wootton’s life, on the other. The woman seemed constantly to disappear underneath the piles of what she did. I kept removing the layers, so that she saw the daylight again, but she still seemed determined to hide. People talk

about 'writing a biography', yet it is not the writing that is the journey, but the researching and the data-collecting and the sifting of data that come first. A good portion of the work that goes into writing a biography is filing: imposing some system of order on the assembled material, so that what is faintly remembered, completely forgotten, or looked for again can be found. Although there is a literature on life-writing, there are very few 'how to do it' guides; the housework of biography, like other forms of housework, is not much spoken about. But the process of collecting and organizing the data is what yields the picture round which the biography is written. This was how I discovered what I did not know at the beginning – just *how much* Barbara Wootton did to shape public policy, and to leave a heritage of writing and analysis which is so remarkable a foundation for what is today known as 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' public policy. I often joked to friends and colleagues over the period when I was researching and writing *A Critical Woman* that I would never have embarked on it had I realized how much ground there was to cover.

There are many challenges in trying to write a narrative about someone's life.⁸ The relationship between biographers and their subjects is one of them. If the biographer likes the subject too much, there is the danger of uncritical hagiography. The biographer reads too much into her or his subject, making her or him too much the centre of attention and action, and through a kind of 'vicarious egocentrism', there is liable to be an excess of apology and defence.⁹ Ambivalence or dislike can lead to other forms of one-sided interpretation. Although biographers sometimes change their minds about their subjects in the course of writing about them – dislike turns to like, regard to disaffection, and unanticipated discoveries may upset originally held interpretations – I feel much the same about Barbara Wootton at the end of writing *A Critical Woman* as I did at the outset. In the writing of a biography, there is a very concrete sense of a dialogue with one's subject, of the sparking of arguments, of the testing of insights, of *opposition*. Barbara Wootton has been very good at this, so I have her to thank for maintaining the level of my interest in her. At the end, I still admire her, and I remain overawed by the amount and importance of what she achieved. But she has also retained her capacity to irritate me – not just because of her absolutely impeccable logic and punctilious attention to detail and the way she gets everything right, but because sometimes, when she succumbs to normal human fallibility and gets things wrong, she appears to have difficulty in recognizing and admitting this.

As well as what biographers may think or feel about their subjects, there is the problem of identification. The biographer may identify with the subject, which is itself a danger, though some form of identification is probably a necessary element

in biography, because if you do not get lost in someone's life, you are unlikely to find an authentic story to write about. I have spent more than three years living with Barbara Wootton, and at times have felt as though I have begun to think and speak like her. If I did not sympathize with her values and her outlook and her interests in the first place, this temporary merging of identity would, of course, never have happened. I cannot rule out the possible result that there is too much of me in *A Critical Woman*; but I prefer to think that here is simply a good match between biographer and subject: two women, with similar academic and policy interests, though with different social backgrounds and separated by half a century.

In other respects, Barbara Wootton and Ann Oakley are very different kinds of people. Barbara Wootton enjoyed the networking, ceremonies and accolades of the public policy world; she had an unsatisfying, at times tragic, personal life; she had no close family; and she did not call herself a feminist. In these ways, I, as her biographer, do not share her experiences or her inclinations. She might not agree with the emphasis I have placed on what happened to women in her lifetime in this story about her life. But to me, the transformation in the lives of women that occurred during the major part of the twentieth century, and to which Barbara Wootton's own role contributed, is a key part of the context in which she worked and had an impact. A relative of hers expressed the view that she would want, above all, to be remembered for her intellectual work.¹⁰ *A Critical Woman* sets out to be an intellectual biography: principally an account of how Barbara Wootton's thought and philosophy evolved through the various stages of her life and was reflected in what she said, wrote and did. But the mind is part of the body and the body belongs to a social order. 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.'¹¹ Thus, I have also tried 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, the interplay between the personal and the public, the effect of one on the other, is a constantly running theatre, not only of the imagination, but of the real way in which the lives of human beings construct the social world.

The choices I made in writing this story about the life and work of Barbara Wootton have had certain consequences for the format of the book. While it does, on the whole, follow the chronology of her life, there are some exceptions. Chapter 1 begins with her entry into the House of Lords as the first woman life peer. Socialist readers may be irritated by this, but the invasion of this most patriarchal and undemocratic structure, finally, by women, and the attendant nonsenses about dress and ceremony and toilets and so forth, seemed to me too good to miss as a starting point. The narratives in chapters 2 and 3 about her birth, family, early

life and education are more standard biographical stratagems. Chapter 4 is about Jack Wootton, the man whom she married at the age of twenty and spent thirty-six hours with before he was killed in the Battle of Passchendaele in the First World War. Jack Wootton took up a small proportion of Barbara Wootton's life in a material sense; emotionally, however, he was an epic and eponymic presence throughout all of it. His death removed her from the normal world of wifehood and motherhood. It also pressured her to forge an independent life for herself away from her family, at a time when for most women this only happened with marriage. Chapters 5 and 6 describe this process of separation from her family, and her first encounters with the world of paid work in the academic setting of Cambridge and the political world of London. In Chapter 7 we meet another side of Barbara Wootton: her hidden life as a fiction-writer, played out during the same period as her exploration of the Soviet experiment in central economic planning, which had a substantial impact on her own economic thinking, and on the contribution she made to economic debates and Labour Party policy. Chapter 8 is like Chapter 4: an interlude, devoted to a husband. Of course, husbands were much more than interludes in Barbara Wootton's life, but they were not constantly present as intellectual partners – Jack because he died, and George Wright, whom she married in 1935 when she was thirty-eight, because he was a very different kind of man altogether. Chapter 9 takes up the theme of her work for a federal union of nations opposed to war, a movement which would eventually lead to closer relations between Britain and other European countries; and returns to her lifelong preoccupation with how to combine democracy with centralized planning: she thought you could, but others considered the principles of free-market capitalism far too sacred to expose to the flagellations of a bossy centralized State. Chapter 10 carries the title of Barbara's major critique of neoclassical economics, *Lament for Economics*, and is about her writings and thought on economics, and her move away from the label of a professional economist. Chapters 11 and 12 follow the path of her career as an academic social scientist, her book *Testament for Social Science*, and that first trail-blazing analysis of the scientific, or rather unscientific, basis of criminology, *Social Science and Social Pathology*. Chapter 13 is another interlude about a new phase in her life: the move to a house in Surrey away from London and George Wright with a new companion, a woman. I have devoted Chapter 14 to the area of Barbara Wootton's life in which her name is most remembered: crime and penal policy. By the time we get to Chapter 15, we are back at the beginning, with Baroness Wootton of Abinger in the House of Lords; and we stay there for Chapter 16 when she holds onto her role in the House of Lords, and to life, before dying in her ninety-second year in a Surrey nursing home. The final

chapter, Chapter 17, attempts to sum up her achievements and her impact: *The World She Never Made* of the 1967 autobiography has become *The World She Definitely Did Help to Make*. But how is it, and why is it, that the world appears largely to have forgotten what she did; and – a much more general question – what might this forgetting tell us about our habits of regarding only certain types of lives as worth remembering?

Biography, like all genres, has its conventions, and I have taken a particular position on some of them in *A Critical Woman*. Firstly, there are endnotes, indicated by superscripts in the text, and quite a lot of them. The endnotes, mostly very short, are there for people who are interested in my sources, and/or who are surprised by some of the statements I make; otherwise they should be ignored. There is no comprehensive bibliography of Barbara Wootton's work in *A Critical Woman*; that has been reserved for a website (<http://www.barbarawootton.co.uk>). The interested reader will also find there examples of her work and some of her media appearances. Secondly, all biographers have to decide what to call their subjects: I call Barbara either 'Barbara Wootton' or 'Barbara'. My decision to call her 'Barbara' has the effect sometimes of making the relationship between us seem too intimate, which is unfortunate, and not intended. (I can hear her arguing with me about this.) According to several of her friends I interviewed, she did prefer being called just 'Barbara', and, after becoming a baroness in 1958, she announced her intention of not using the title.¹² However, she could get quite shirty at times with people she did not know well who left off her title, or who got it wrong. Equally irritating to her were misspellings of the surname which she carried with her for the seventy-one years after Jack Wootton's death: there was, she protested, something that amounted to an 'international conspiracy' to rob her of one 'T' or one 'O' or both;¹³ the effect of losing one 'T' was worst because it made her name look mean and unbalanced.¹⁴

One great challenge about biographical life-writing is the one I have left until last, because it is in many ways the most difficult. The standard Victorian 'testimonial-to-a-great-life' tradition of biography made a very clear separation between public and private aspects of a person's life. The convention was that the public story could be told, but the private one should not be; it was irrelevant, essentially separate. This division has now been worn down by the more modern view (one promoted by feminists particularly) that the personal is political: how someone's private life is lived is an essential part of the public story. It is not only relevant, but likely to be illuminating. Well-known figures such as the economist Maynard Keynes and the social reformer Eleanor Rathbone (both of whom Barbara Wootton knew), have been subjected to both treatments: Robert Skidelsky's

mammoth three volume biography of Keynes included Keynes' homosexuality, in contrast to the previous version by Roy Harrod, which left it out; Eleanor Rathbone's more than forty-year-long relationship with Elizabeth Macadam is present in Susan Pedersen's account of her life, but excised from that by Mary Stocks. Barbara Wootton was married twice, and for two periods in her life she lived with two women. She was clearly very close to one of these women; her first live-in female relationship, in the 1920s and early 1930s, was probably more a matter of practical convenience, though there was also a long-term friendship. But her second female domestic partner was someone with whom she obviously enjoyed a considerable emotional and intellectual intimacy. Having considered the evidence, I do not think there was a physical intimacy as well – at least not in the sexual sense. Barbara Wootton was seen by all her friends as indisputably heterosexual, and one nice anecdote relayed by one of them – it is nice because it introduces a note of frivolity into an otherwise unfalteringly serious life – was that she would never miss an episode of the detective drama 'Perry Mason' on television because she really fancied the character of private investigator Paul Drake who was played by the darkly handsome William Hopper.¹⁵

Actually, I do not even think whether or not Barbara Wootton had a physical relationship with any female partner is a very interesting question; it seems to me very much a prurient enquiry thrown up by a culture obsessed by sexual matters. What is interesting, and important, is how one life meshes with another; the ways in which social interaction, at the personal level, shapes people's lives and thus the difference they make, or do not make, to the world.

There sits on my desk as I write this a small solid brass ornament inscribed with the name 'Barbara' on a tiny plate at the front. It is probably an inkwell; there is a little pole at the side for a writing implement. When you lift the lid of the pot in the centre, the faded blue-and-white insignia of the House of Lords blinks at you from the bottom. The act of lifting the lid causes a tune to be played; the item is dual-purpose, both a musical box and an aide to writing. But the lid reveals another surprise: embedded in its underside is what looks remarkably like an amethyst engagement ring. This ornament is in my possession because Vera Seal gave it to me: 'You should have something of Barbara's', she said. Barbara had it because an unknown admirer gave it to her. The identity of the admirer remains unknown and, on the whole, I have resisted the temptation to try to find out who it was.

More puzzling to me, and more worthy of puzzle, is the fate of Barbara Wootton's potential destiny as a mother. I refer to this at several points in the book. She never, to my knowledge, had a child. But she made no secret of her regret that she did not become a mother. She was probably pregnant once or twice; why did she not

give birth? Why did she leave money to an adoption charity in her will? Were her feelings about thwarted motherhood behind her awkward position in the debates which led up to the 1967 Abortion Act? I do not feel I have got to the bottom of this. But perhaps Barbara did not want me to. Even from the most prying eyes of the most searching biographer some secrets should remain hidden, because this saves us from the danger of falling into that illusory trap of the one true story.

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