

BOOTH, FLORENCE ELEANOR (1861 - 1957), Salvationist and social reformer

Name: Florence Eleanor Booth
Date of birth: 1861
Date of death: 1957
Spouse: William Bramwell Booth
Child: Catherine Bramwell Booth
Child: Mary Booth Booth
Child: Florence Miriam Booth
Child: Bramwell Bernard Booth
Child: Olive Emma Booth
Child: Dora Booth
Child: William Wycliffe Booth
Parent: Isabell Hawker Soper
Parent: Jane Eleanor Soper (née Levick)
Gender: Female
Occupation: Salvationist and social reformer
Area of activity: Religion; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: Bryan Boots

Florence Booth was born on 12 September 1861 in Blaina, Monmouthshire, the eldest of the four children of Dr Isabell Hawker Soper (1833-1907) and his wife Jane Eleanor (née Levick, 1831-1870). Dr Soper, who was a native of Plymouth, was employed by the local iron works and collieries as a physician and surgeon, and his wife was the daughter of a Welsh ironmaster.

Florence was a gifted musician and had an ambition to follow her father into medicine, but her mother died when she was only nine years old and she was sent to live with two aunts in London until her father's remarriage. She had just passed her final school examination when she attended a meeting of the Salvation Army with her aunts in Whitechapel as a sightseer. Here she heard Catherine Booth speak and made the decision to follow Christ and learn more about the Salvation Army, although neither her aunts nor her father were pleased that she had taken up with the relatively unknown movement, associating with drunkards and others who had led a life of vice. Florence became friendly with the Booth family including their son Bramwell (1856-1929). After making the decision to join the Army, by 1881 she had been promoted to Lieutenant and in that year went with the Booths' eldest daughter Catherine to begin the Salvation Army's work in France. There she attracted the attention of the Parisian authorities when trying to sell *En Avant!* on the streets of the city.

It was at this time that Bramwell asked her to marry him. As she was not yet 21 her father was against the marriage, but finally, on 12 October 1882, Captain Florence Soper married Chief of Staff Bramwell Booth at Clapton Congress Hall before a crowd of 6,000 Salvationists, the wedding ceremony being performed by General William Booth. Florence and Bramwell had seven children and in order to avoid outside influences Florence taught the eldest four at home for at least two hours every day. Having been left an inheritance by one of her aunts she employed a governess to instruct the youngest three similarly. All the children played an active role in the Salvation Army and the family lived at The Homestead, Hadley Wood, Barnet, London.

Far from staying in the shadow of her husband, Florence Booth carved out her own place in the early development of Salvation Army social work. She had anguished from the first over the lives of the 'poor harlots' she saw on the streets of London's East End, and in 1884 she inaugurated The Women's Social Work which was run from a small house at 194 Hanbury Street, Whitechapel, London. She continued to lead this pioneering aspect of the Salvation Army's work for the next 28 years, until Bramwell became General. She was given the rank of commissioner in 1888, and directed the Rescue Work as it spread around the world. Realizing the need for additional care for pregnant women, the Salvation Army opened rescue homes across the globe.

Florence felt a real responsibility to women and children both in and out of the Army world. In 1907 a women's division was launched, called the Home League, with a comprehensive program providing education in family living, fellowship for the aged and lonely, and an opportunity of serving the needy. 'A happy home is the surest safeguard against all evil,' said Florence at its inauguration meeting, 'and where a home is not happy the devil enters and generally finds his hands full.' As the league spread to other countries, meetings varied with the needs of the area. Women learned to cook, to sew, to care for their babies. Today, more than a century later, the Home League stands as a legacy of Florence Booth.

When William Booth died in 1912 his son Bramwell was promoted to General and the Salvation Army accepted Florence as

first lady. In April 1913, in her new capacity, she visited Paris, where she had served with Catherine, and spoke publicly in fluent French. The Finnish Congress that June, which she led, was reported to be the 'mightiest thing in the history of the Territory.' Germany's Congress followed in July. In the months following she led a triumphant campaign in Belgium and then was received by Queen Wilhelmina in Amsterdam in an unusually long audience.

In 1915, Florence introduced the idea of Lifesaving Guards for girls as an extension of the Lifesaving Scouts for boys. Though some thought that athletic skills and pursuits would make girls look less womanly, the Guards got off to an enthusiastic start and she gathered the first 120 girls in eight troops at Regent Hall, London. In 1921, she announced the formation of a new junior girls' organization, the Sunbeams, whose ages at that time would be eight or nine. Girls in many countries now benefit from the recreational, service and skill-building projects of these groups.

When Commissioner Henry Howard retired as Chief of the Staff in 1921, succeeded by Commissioner Edward Higgins, Florence became British Commissioner, responsible for all the Army's evangelical work in the United Kingdom. She held this office until November 1921, and again from June 1922 to March 1925. Her success helped gain acceptance for the placing of other women in positions of high authority.

Around 1925, rumblings began among certain factions of the Army about the Deed Poll's stipulation that the General was to appoint his successor. They felt that this choice should rest with the High Council of world leaders. In the effort to discredit Bramwell Booth, his wife and children also came under criticism for having too much influence on his decisions.

On the General's previous overseas tours, Mrs Booth had remained in England with power of attorney to sign documents in his absence. In 1926, on his last tour of America, the General took Florence with him, and she led some of the sessions. His last tour in 1927 took him to Japan by way of Canada, where his schedule was demanding and his welcome tumultuous. The unrest within the Army, however, continued to chip away at his peace of mind. The General's health failed and his doctors forbade him to imperil his recovery by attending to business.

During his illness Florence occasionally went to headquarters for conference with the Chief of Staff and others, and led the annual councils for the Women's Social Work officers. She resumed command of Women's Work before passing it on to her daughter Catherine. She continued leadership of the Guards and Sunbeams and responsibility for the worldwide training of officers, and was also a Justice of the Peace, the first magistrate to visit Holloway Prison.

In January 1929 Bramwell Booth was removed from office by the High Council, and the Chief of Staff was elected as the new General. Bramwell died on 16 June 1929, after which Florence retired from active service, no longer the most influential woman in the international Army.

Florence Booth died on 10 June 1957. Her funeral was held at the Clapton Congress Hall and she was buried with her husband at Abney Park Cemetery, Stoke Newington. Florence Booth House, an emergency shelter for homeless women, was opened in Toronto in the year 2000.

Author

Bryan Boots

Sources

Salvation Army Resource Centre

welldigger: [Revival in the Ebbw Fach \(5\) Blaina](#)

The South Wales gazette and Newport news, 28 September 1951, pp. 4 and 7

Frances Dingman, *Florence Soper Booth* (1997)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Florence Booth](#)

Images

National Portrait Gallery: [Florence Eleanor Booth \(née Soper\) \(1861-1957\)](#)

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