

## The Remarkable Emily Hobhouse by Marion Stephens

Emily Hobhouse was born on April 9, 1860 into a position of privilege. Using the words of author Elsabé Brits, “She was an upper-class British woman, who took the plight of the women and children in concentration camps in a far-off land to heart during the Anglo-Boer war.” Emily was indeed British but more importantly, Emily was Cornish. She was born in Cornwall and spent her formative years in her village home St. Ive, near Liskeard in East Cornwall.



In 2024, After extensive renovation, and building the Emily Hobhouse Museum was completed and opened to the public. During my stay in Cornwall last September, I visited the museum. It is a remarkable place. I felt that I re-lived some of the horrific experiences of this remarkable and courageous woman.

Emily’s mother Caroline was the daughter of Sir William Lewis Salisbury-Trelawny, descendent of Bishop Trelawny, one of the seven Bishops imprisoned in the Tower of London. Sir William left a substantial inheritance to his wife and children. Emily’s mother Caroline inherited £10,000 – an enormous sum at the time.



Emily’s father Reginald Hobhouse was a descendent of John Hobhouse of Minehead. Two of John’s sons went into seafaring trades on the Bristol Channel. Henry established a ship building yard while his brother Isaac began trading between Bristol, the west coast of Africa, the West Indies and the ‘plantation colonies’ in America. Isaac acquired a large fortune from his commercial interests which included the slave trade.



Although Emily’s family may not have directly benefited from the slave trade, this dark stain on her ancestry may well have shaped her passion for those who were impoverished and oppressed.

Emily's father, Reginald, was one of four sons and four daughters. The boys were educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford and eventually had successful careers. Emily's father Reginald became the rector of the Anglican church in St. Ive parish, and the Archdeacon of Bodmin, Cornwall. Emily was the fifth of six children born to Caroline and Reginald Hobhouse. She was the youngest daughter. She had three older sisters, Caroline, Blanche and Maude. An older brother, Alfred and a younger brother, Leonard born four years after Emily in 1864.



Unlike her brothers who were sent away to prestigious schools where they learnt to ask questions, discuss and debate, Emily and her sisters had a governess and were taught skills such as sewing, singing, playing the piano and French.

Emily was greatly aware of the benefits and quality of the education her brothers received, and the inequality. At the age of 16, Emily was sent to finishing school in London. There, she was given riding lessons and taught how to entertain, be a good wife and live in high society.

In the winter of Emily's sixteenth year her parents took the three younger daughters Blanche, Maude and Emily to the south of France, hoping that Blanche, suffering ill health would improve. Sadly, her health worsened, and she died. After Blanche's death the family returned to Cornwall. There was no longer enough money to send Emily back to finishing school and she had to be satisfied with violin lessons in the neighbouring town of Liskeard.

This was a difficult and lonely point in Emily's life. Her sister Carrie was married, her mother's spirit was crushed by the loss of Blanche, and her father increasingly worked in the parish or away from home. A few years later Emily's mother Caroline developed a brain tumour and died after a few months of illness. Emily was now 20 years old. She and her younger sister, Maud were left to look after their father whose health deteriorated after his wife's death. Maud married one of the church's curates and Emily now 29 years old was left on her own to look after her father. She taught Sunday School, played the organ and sang in the choir during services in the church. She also had a heart for impoverished families living in the parish and would attend to their needs. Emily's interest in politics was stimulated by reading the Times Newspaper to her father each day.

Like her brother Leonard and her uncle, Lord Hobhouse, in London, Emily had liberal views, in contrast to her father's conservative convictions. Upon her father's death all the family possessions were auctioned. Emily inherited £53,000.00 and left St Ives and never returned. She was around the age of 34 years.

Released now, from the responsibilities that tied her to the parish of St. Ives, Emily set her sights on seeing more of the world. Knowing that miners had emigrated from Cornwall to America in their thousands and that they would have social needs, she decided to follow the same route as a missionary. She took a servant from Cornwall, Mary Scourge. They arrived in New York by ship in July 1895 and spent a few days there before travelling to Chicago.

Emily and Mary spent a few days in Chicago before travelling by train to the town of Virginia, Minnesota. It was August. The housing conditions were brutal. There were bed bugs and lice infestations and the weather unbearable hot. Emily was familiar with the drinking and gambling habits of miners who worked the mines near St. Ives but was not expecting the number of drinking bars in Virginia. Nevertheless, Emily got involved in the community, just as she had back home in St. Ives.



She collected money from residents (\$200) and started a library, opened a recreation hall, founded a church choir and a Sunday School, she held mission services in the work camps, and she opened her home to everyone and taught adults to read and write. In an attempt to resolve the abuse of alcohol that she saw, she began a temperance movement. Her good intentions, however, were met with resistance from: the saloon owners and those in positions of authority in the community. One of the first to oppose Emily was the local minister of the Episcopal Church. He strongly disapproved of the work she was doing, especially holding mission services in work camps!

Emily did however have one strong supporter. A man by the name of John Carr Jackson. He had arrived in town two years before Emily in 1893. In those two years, He rose from being a store clerk to the owner of Jackson & Co. a general dealership that sold camp equipment. He became the deputy chairman of Emily's

library committee and he and Emily became good friends and eventually became engaged to be married.

Perhaps Emily was impressed by his self-confidence and political ambitions. He had intentions of running for Congress. In 1896, John was elected the town's mayor. At this time, the town began to experience economic hardship. Mines were closing and John experienced financial difficulties because folks couldn't pay the money they owed him. John and Emily decided they should leave the town. Emily left in September 1896 for Mexico. Here she used her inheritance to buy a farm with coffee, banana pineapple and vanilla plantations. John was to follow after he had wound up the business. Days and weeks went by and John never arrived.

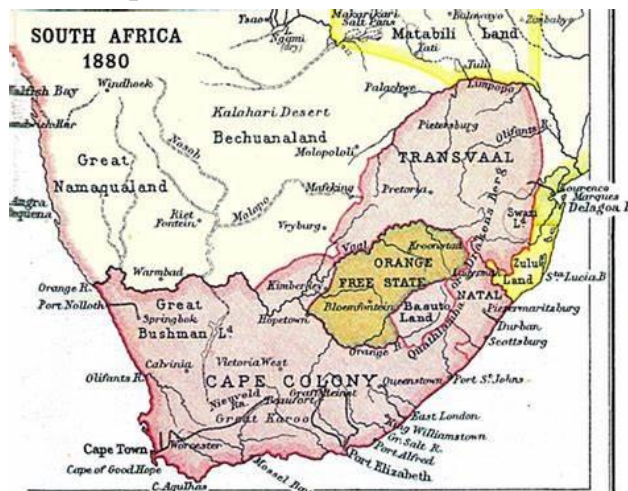
A year later, in 1897, Emily returned to London where she stayed with her brother Leonard and sister-in-law Nora. It seems that John sold his business in Virginia and left town hurriedly. The man who had bought John's store had to close immediately due to lawsuits because John was insolvent. On top of this, Virginia's coffers were empty after John's year as mayor. John did meet with Emily later, in London, but little is known about this visit. Emily returned on her own to the farm she had bought for them in Mexico expecting that John would be there, but there was no trace of him. Within weeks she returned to London and no longer owned the farm. It is not clear whether John had abused her financially or how much of her inheritance remained.



In 1899 newspapers were filled with the news of impending war in South Africa. At that time South Africa consisted of the **Cape Colony**, which was first established by the Dutch East Indian Company in 1652 then came under British control in 1806, and **the Natal**, which the British annexed in 1843.



In 1852 and 1854 Britain recognised the independence of **two Boer Republics, The Transvaal and the Orange Free State.**, but in 1857 it annexed the Transvaal as a first step to federated South Africa. In 1880 in response to their disagreement with British oppressive rule the first War of Independence, also known as the First Boer war was fought.; (this was a short but bloody war between the Boers of the Transvaal and Britain) After this the Transvaal's independence was given back when the Boers defeated the British.



It was the second Boer War also known as the second War of Independence that caught Emily's attention. Three weeks after the outbreak of the war on October 11, 1899 the South African Conciliation Committee was launched in England by Liberal party. The president of the committee was Leonard Courtney, later Lord Courtney of Penwith. Emily knew the Courtney family and soon got involved in the work of the committee, which aimed to distribute truthful information about the war and to encourage peace between the people of Dutch and English heritage in South Africa.

In February 1899, Emily attended the congress of the Liberal party in London, but it irked her that they had not invited a single woman to address them. So, she decided that women should play a greater role and organised a protest meeting against the war. Thousands of women from across the country attended the mass meeting. This meeting and subsequent gatherings were met with riotous mobs. As a consequence, Emily was shunned by many relatives and friends.

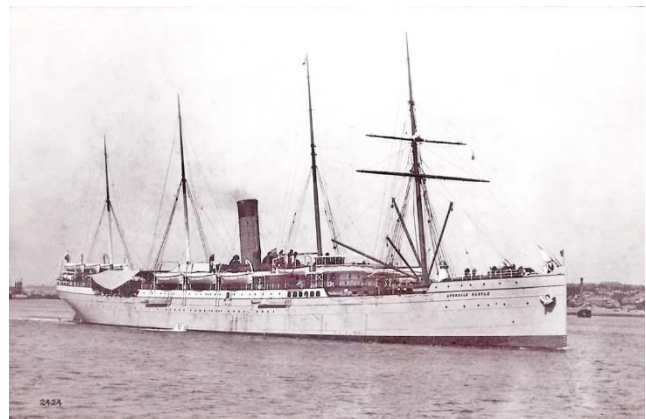
On May 24, 1900 the Orange Free state was annexed by Britain followed by the Transvaal on June 5<sup>th</sup>. Martial law was declared shortly after. The Boer forces embarked on guerilla warfare. The British warned that Boers who continued fighting would suffer severe personal losses. This was the start of the 'scorched earth policy'. Buildings suspected of sheltering Boer commandos, farmhouses, farm buildings and farm animals were set alight and



burnt to the ground. By January 1901 hundreds of farms in the Free State and the Transvaal were completely destroyed for the continued resistance against the British. The men had either been killed or imprisoned, leaving thousands of women and children homeless, distressed and desperate.

Emily learnt about these atrocities from reports out of South Africa. Although the news reached a few newspapers in England, much of the British public was unaware. Emily was appalled by these events, and decided that she had no choice but to travel out to South Africa and offer her support to the suffering. She had to win approval from her brother Leonard and Uncle Arthur and Aunt Mary (Lord and Lady Hobhouse), with whom she had been living; and find the money to fund her plans. Eventually she accomplished both.

On December 7, 1900 Emily boarded the Avondale Castle arriving in Table Mountain Harbour on December 27<sup>th</sup>. Emily was the guest of Caroline and Dr. Andrew Murray in Cape Town, whom she had met when they were visiting family in London. They had connections to the Cape Parliament and were involved in antiwar activities. By January 1901, Emily had learnt much more about the harsh treatment of women and children who were being placed in refugee camps and wanted to see for herself.



Sir Alfred Milner, was the Governor of the Transvaal, the Free State, the Cape and also the British High Commissioner at the time. After writing several letters requesting an audience with him, she was invited to lunch on January 8<sup>th</sup> 1901. When she arrived, she found that rather than meeting with Sir Arthur in private, she was seated around the meal table with Sir Arthur and eight other men. When Sir Arthur began his discussion with Emily in the company of these men, she cut him short and begged for a few minutes for a private conversation after lunch. He reluctantly agreed. During this meeting Emily made sure Sir Arthur got a clear picture of the situation confronting the women and children in the camps and requested a rail truck to take the relief supplies of food and clothing she had brought with her from England and in

addition she requested permission to take an Afrikaner woman with her. Finally, Milner gave his consent, providing Lord Kitchener, overall commander of the British forces agreed.

On January 17<sup>th</sup> Emily received word that Lord Kitchener had agreed she could travel to the Free State but under certain conditions. Two of these were:

*She could only go as far north as Bloemfontein thus denying her access to other camps and that she preferably not take the 'Dutch lady' along. This was a blow because Emily had wanted to take Mrs. Elizabeth Roos, a well-known community leader, who would act as her interpreter and assist Emily in locating certain towns and places.*

Emily paid Milner another visit to see if he could be persuaded to let her visit other camps in the north. But Milner said that Lord Kitchener had the final say in the matter. After a full day packing a rail truck with foods supplies and clothing Emily began her journey the following day to the Bloemfontein. It was January 22<sup>nd</sup> She was a 40-year-old woman, travelling alone on a slow-moving troop train. She had difficulty buying food at the station stops. The food outlets would be crowded by throngs of soldiers. She was thankful for the food basket from Cape friends, filled with bread, apricot jam and cocoa. Later she would survive on this kind of substance for weeks and months. On the journey, she found the landscape of the veld strange; the unusual rock formations, lack of trees and the solitude. It was extremely hot, dry and dusty. There were dust storms that penetrated through the closed train windows and doors that filled her eyes, ears and hair with red coloured sand.



On arriving in Bloemfontein and once she had arranged for her relief supplies to be unloaded, she spent the night at an inn. The next day she was met by Caroline Fichardt, the mother of a contact she had made at the Cape. It soon became evident that they were both under surveillance. Emily was to be a guest in Caroline's home, but only if the military governor of Bloemfontein, Major General George Pretzman gave his written permission. Caroline was worried that if they were seen to step out of line, her two daughters would be punished. Emily immediately met with the Major. She managed to obtain not only his permission to stay with the Fichardt family, but also permission to visit the camps south of Bloemfontein.



The concentration camp at Bloemfontein was about 3 kms for the city centre. There were 2,000 women, 900 children and a few men. These were men known as 'hand-uppers' by the Boers. They had laid down their arms voluntarily and, in most cases, signed an oath of neutrality.



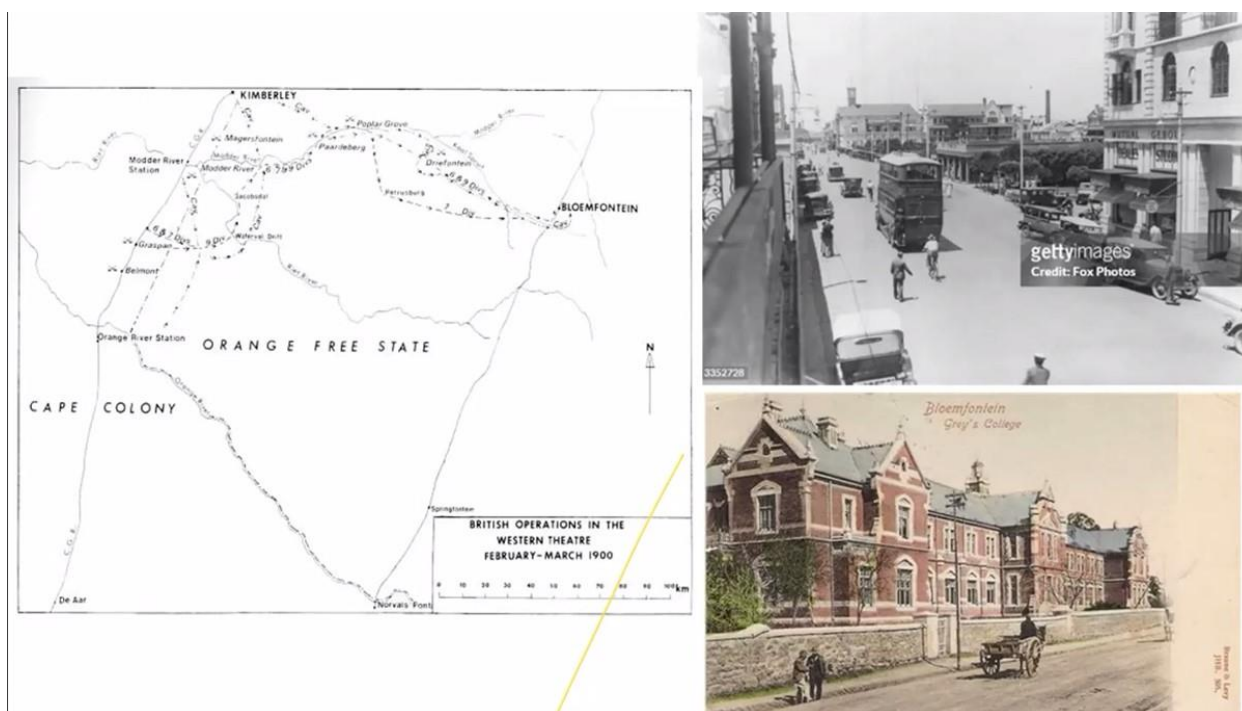
Over the next few days, Emily met with the women to hear their stories. She learnt from them how their farmhouses and crops had been burnt, and their livestock killed or left to die and how they were rounded up and transported for days by trains or on wagons. There were stories of loss, exposure, starvation and sickness. Within four days Emily witnessed the nature and misery in the camps. The most basic of necessities were lacking. There was no soap and candles were used only when someone was seriously ill. The dead lay in the heat amongst the living until they were buried. There were flies everywhere. On average six people were crowded into one small tent. In several cases there were nine or ten in a tent. Fuel: wood or coal was in short supply for cooking or boiling water to drink. Typhoid was rampant. Food rations were insufficient, and so the list goes on.

When she next saw Major Pretzman, Emily described what she had seen and told him exactly what she thought of his camp. He then wrote to Governor Milner indicating that Emily was sympathizing with the enemy and that as a result of her visits, the refugees had suddenly found they were being badly treated and should



be supplied with many more comforts! The conditions at the next two camps that Emily visited, Norvalspont and Allwall North were somewhat better than what she had seen at Bloemfontein. It seems there was a difference in the labelling of the captives and the quality of their care in the camps.

A nurse told Emily that the seven-year-old girl in the hospital tent had been neglected by her mother. Emily found out that her husband was still on commando, therefore classified as undesirable. She and others so classified received smaller rations than others. The **inmates** as they were called at Norvalspont and Allwall, had access to clean water piped from a spring. The food was slightly better and disease had not broken out, although no-one taken to the hospital came out alive. There were schools for the children, but clothes were needed urgently.



Based on the conditions she saw in most of the camps and the stories she heard from the women living in them Emily planned to provide, to the public, an alternative account to the narrative presented by the military authorities and the British politicians. She appealed to her Aunt Mary, Lady Hobhouse asking her to write to The Times so that more people would understand the situation. The South Africa Women and Children Distress Fund Committee met after receiving letters from Emily and forwarded further funds but these scarcely covered the cost of much needed supplies.

Meanwhile, the war was dragging on longer than the British expected. In an effort to speed things up, Kitchener ordered the scorched earth policy be applied more aggressively. On her travels between camps Emily witnessed the results first-hand.

Alongside the railway line Emily saw a great mass of animals, wagons, horses, soldiers and crowds of displaced people, both black and white. She could only imagine what these unsheltered, hungry and frightened human beings must have been feeling having watched helplessly as their homes, farms and animals went up in flames. The numbers of refugees and death rates were rapidly increasing. Even health care workers were among the dead. Emily despaired at the deterioration of the already poor camp conditions. She was further shocked to read Kitchener's claims in the newspaper, that families in the camps were comfortable and happy.

Realizing that the British public were being fed lies Emily decided she must return to England and shed light among the politicians and the public. She booked a passage, arriving in Southampton on May 24, 1901. By now Emily was well known in South Africa but military spies had spread falsehoods about her; that she had caused trouble and unrest in the camps and that she was on a political mission for the Liberals. The British soldiers regarded her as if she was a fool and a traitor.



Once back in Britain, she first approached the politicians, mostly members of the ruling Conservative Party, rather than go to the press. She was

dismayed to find the Secretary for War, John Brodrick was painting a rosy picture in the House of Commons, about the state of things in the camps. She managed to secure a personal meeting with him and gave him a first-hand account of the actual situation there. Brodrick seemed receptive and asked her to put forward her recommendations for improvement in writing, which she did immediately.

She recommended the release of the captives who had friends or relatives they could stay with, that those who had applied to leave the camps be permitted to

do so, that people should be allowed to go to the towns to work there, that bilingual matrons be appointed, and that the government should take heed of the report of the Bloemfontein camp doctor, and finally that clergy should be allowed into camps to minister to the people and conduct funerals. But when word of these recommendations got back to the British authority in the Orange Free State, Emily was vilified and labeled ‘pro-Boer and a screamer’. Brodrick did take some of Emily’s revelations seriously and some of her recommendations were adopted, but she received no official recognition for these.

The majority of the English public showed no sympathy for the women and children in the camps and Emily continued to be snubbed by the public. She embarked on a speaking tour addressing 26 public meetings in four weeks. At many of these, riots broke out and, in some cases, she was pelted with vegetables.

Britain and the Boer Republics finally made peace in June 1902, but there was much bitterness toward the English. The war had left thousands sick, and wounded and destitute. The repatriation scheme was a failure. In an attempt to finish the work, she had started Emily returned to South Africa and worked with the Repatriation Department, creating ways to work the land again for food production and teach women skills such as spinning and weaving wool (sheep did well in South Africa) resulting on the birth of cottage industries.

She became an honorary citizen of South Africa for her humanitarian work there. In Bloemfontein, South Africa, the oldest residence on the campus of the University of the Free State is named after Emily Hobhouse. She was an indomitable force and a remarkable Cornish woman.

*Thank you to: Elsabé Brits, author “Rebel English Woman: the remarkable Life of Emily Hobhouse for permission to use her written material and photographs and Jennifer Hobhouse Balme for copies of some of Emily’s personal photographs. Jennifer’s grandfather was Professor Leonard Hobhouse, Emily’s youngest brother.*