

Labour lives no. 6

Eva Gore-Booth

Eva Gore-Booth was a labour activist, suffragist, pacifist, vegetarian, feminist, mystic and poet. Born in Lissadell, County Sligo, on 22 May 1870, she is often remembered chiefly as a muse of W.B. Yeats, who referred to her in his famous poem, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz', as dreaming of 'some vague Utopia'. It is only in the last decade or so that her extensive, and indeed innovative, life's work has begun to be explored in depth in its own right.

Eva Gore-Booth was the third child of Georgina Mary Hill and Sir Henry Gore-Booth, one of the largest Anglo-Irish landlords in the west of Ireland. The family was known for its relatively enlightened approach to tenants, albeit within the parameters of a paternalistic system that Gore-Booth herself was ultimately to reject and abandon.¹ Gore-Booth was educated at home by governesses, and was a sensitive and thoughtful child. During the crisis of 1879–80, her parents involved their children in handing out food and clothing to tenants, and the destitution she witnessed made a lasting impression.

Due to fears that she had consumption, Gore-Booth was sent on a trip to Italy in 1896 to convalesce. There she met Esther Roper, a labour activist and suffragist from Manchester, and the two women immediately became friends. Roper earned her living as a suffrage union organiser, focusing her efforts on the slums and factories. The Gore-Booth family income partially came from estates in Manchester, and Gore-Booth was immediately curious about Roper's work. Due to its industrial slums, Manchester had long been a locus for the ferment of radical ideas, with social reformers and political radicals such as Friedrich Engels, Richard Cobden, Edward Carpenter and John and Jacob Bright providing precedents for the young Roper. Roper was unusual among the suffragists of her day in prioritising suffrage for working-class women, which was probably partially due to her own working-class origins. Roper's father had started life as a factory hand from an impoverished home.

Gore-Booth's decision less than a year after her trip to Italy to join Roper in her work in Manchester was a radical one for her class and time. Her politicisation occurred much earlier in life than that of her sister Constance, influenced to some degree by her lack of interest in the traditional roles of wife or maiden aunt allotted to women of her class. The pairing of women who wished to have careers, or who were involved in radical politics, had practical and emotional benefits at the time and was quite common. While Roper was pamphleteering and giving speeches at factories and mills, Gore-Booth's initial activism was largely educational. Through the writings of Mrs Wolstenholme Elmy and Edward Carpenter, she became exposed to revolutionary ideas on marriage and sexuality. The Manchester University Settlement at which Eva worked was modelled on Toynbee Hall in London, and was located in the slums of Ancoats.

Gore-Booth's burgeoning interest in mysticism was influenced by the Unitarian minister John Trevor, who founded the Labour Church in 1891, and whose stated goal was 'to get the people outside the walls of their church...into vital relations with the Living God and the Outcast Poor.'² Theosophy, a common refuge for the non-conforming upper classes, also influenced her.



In 1900, Gore-Booth became co-secretary with Sarah Dickinson of the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade Union Council (WTUC), which was a branch of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council. In 1903, she became the WTUC representative on the Technical Instruction Committee of the city council, and campaigned in this capacity to prevent the exclusion of girls from scholarships at the Municipal School of Technology. In the by-election campaign of 1901, she and Roper supported David Shackleton, who stood for Labour at Clitheroe, and who pledged to seek enfranchisement for women. Although elected in August 1902, he failed to press the suffrage issue in parliament, despite having been funded in his campaign by unions consisting of 60 per cent women. Following this disappointment, Gore-Booth, Roper, Sarah Reddish and Dickinson founded the Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and Other Representation Committee, to support Thorley Smith as a candidate.

In 1901 and 1902, Gore-Booth and Roper played a significant role in the political formation of Christabel Pankhurst, who was then lacking political direction. Through their influence, she became involved in the suffrage movement and gained a valuable political apprenticeship. She later came to repudiate Gore-Booth and Roper's pacifism and emphasis on working-class women's suffrage, in favour of the drawing-room suffrage movement dominated by the middle and upper classes, with its greater availability of wealthy donors. However, her decision to study law and her early development as a public speaker were largely nurtured by Gore-Booth and Roper.

As a pamphleteer for the Women's Trade and Labour Council, Gore-Booth wrote *Women's Right to Work* as a response to proposed restrictions on women's participation in certain trades. A central issue in the Manchester by-election of 1908 was the proposal to make it illegal for barmaids to work after 8pm. Gore-Booth and Roper alienated many, including suffragists involved in temperance societies, by vocally supporting barmaids' right to work. Gore-Booth was also successfully active on behalf of female florists' assistants, pit brow workers and chain-makers.

An important milestone in suffragism was the 19 May 1906 deputation to Westminster to present the case for women's suffrage to the Liberal Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Gore-Booth's speech at Westminster focused exclusively on the importance of the vote to working women, who were struggling to live on six or seven shillings a week, 'not a rate of wages that could possibly be forced upon the enfranchised citizens of a free country.' Dickenson spoke in a similar vein, referring directly to her own experience as a factory worker. Campbell-Bannerman's patronising and negative response to the deputation made it clear that women's enfranchisement was not a priority for him, which was a blow to Gore-Booth. Thereafter, cooperation between suffragists of different classes petered out, and Gore-Booth and Roper became increasingly marginalised in the movement, partially due to their anti-conscription stance during the First World War. Despite this, they retained a strong support base amongst working-class suffragists.

Though extremely close to her sister Constance Markievicz, Gore-Booth was disturbed by the violence in Dublin around Easter 1916. Particularly distressing for her were the shooting of pacifist Francis Sheehy Skeffington and the execution of Roger Casement. Gore-Booth distrusted nationalism, due to what she regarded as its associations with militarism. An unusual thinker for her time, her writings reflect an interrelated mix of socialism, environmentalism, pacifism and feminism. The journal *Urania*, which she was involved in publishing, railed against separate-sphere ideology and the inauthentic theatricality associated with traditional gender roles, which she thought robbed both women and men of their full humanity.

In her final years, Gore-Booth became immersed in mysticism, producing a profound and unorthodox study of the Fourth Gospel. This is undoubtedly her most important work, but has yet to be fully examined by scholars. As late as 2004, Dermot James was able to refer to it as an example of Gore-Booth's 'convoluted thought', and as a work comprising her 'late Christian poems'.³ Although

poetic in tone, it is actually a scholarly work of prose that re-interprets the Fourth Gospel in the light of various influences, including her study of ancient Greek. Systematic and learned on its own terms, it is gradually coming to be regarded as an important text in the history of feminist and pacifist philosophy. When Gore-Booth died after an illness on 30 June 1926, Evelyn Underhill wrote in her obituary that her career provided 'a complete answer to those who regard the mystic as a person who remains aloof from the interests, struggles and sorrows of practical life.'⁴ This seamless merging of philosophy with political praxis was central to what Gore-Booth sought to achieve in her life's work.

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Notes

1. Within the parameters of this problematic system, the Gore-Booths were undoubtedly better landlords than others, with rents at the level of Griffith's Valuation before the Land League campaigned on this issue. Unlike other landed families, they put significant resources into relief efforts during the Great Famine and the crisis of 1879–80. Sir Josslyn, brother of Eva Gore-Booth, was one of the first landlords to become involved in encouraging tenants to buy out their holdings under the Wyndham Land Bill of 1903. He was also heavily involved in Sir Horace Plunkett's co-operative movement.
2. Gifford Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography* (London, 1988), p. 67.
3. Dermot James, *The Gore-Booths of Lissadell* (Dublin, 2004), p. 231.
4. Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper*, pp 175–7.

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