

Ada Salter

We print here an extract from a talk given by Graham Taylor* based on his book Ada Salter. Pioneer of Ethical Socialism (Lawrence & Wishart 2016). (For the full talk see <http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/2016/05/19/ada-salter>.)

Originally I knew Ada Salter merely as the wife of Dr Alfred Salter MP, a brilliant doctor who gave up his promising career to settle in Bermondsey with Ada and supply free medical care to the poor.

Alfred followed Ada first into the Liberal Party and then into the Independent Labour Party but he was always presented as the leader and she the follower. This false impression had been created by *Bermondsey Story*, an otherwise wonderful biography of Alfred by Fenner Brockway, published in 1949 and reissued in 1995 on the 50th anniversary of Alfred's death.

It was the preface to the 1995 edition, written by Barry Winter of the ILP, that corrected my erroneous view of Ada. Winter's first sentence reads: 'This is the story not just of a remarkable man, Dr Alfred Salter, but of his equally remarkable wife, Ada.'

He then went further, adding that the *Bermondsey Story* was not just the story of the Salters but of 'a movement'. The ILP was not just a political party, Winter wrote, but 'a way of life' and this way of life attempted to create a socialist life in the future out of 'the way it was lived in the present'. The future socialist society would rest on certain human values but these would never be realised unless incorporated into 'daily practices'.

The ethical means must always match the ethical ends. From Winter's account it seemed that not only had Ada herself been underrated but also the philosophy of the ILP which in his book Brockway had called 'ethical socialism'.

Ada Brown was born in Raunds, Northamptonshire, to a family of Methodist farmers. Her home, Thorpe House, was in an area which had been strongly Quaker and from her youth she was deeply opposed to war.

Inspired by Katherine Hughes, a Christian socialist who had founded in the slums of London an organisation called the Sisters of the People, Ada travelled to London and began a life-long struggle against the evils of the slums. As a Sister of the People, tending the poorest and running her soon to be famous clubs, she eventually joined the

Bermondsey Settlement where she met, then married, Alfred Salter.

After the general election of 1906 Ada left the Liberal Party because its MPs failed to implement an election promise to extend the vote to women. She became active in the Women's Labour League, championing the cause of working-class women not only in housing but also in the factories where they worked. In 1909 she was elected first ever Labour, and first ever woman, councillor in Bermondsey. In fact she was among the first women councillors in Britain.

Her trade union work in the local factories had an unexpected outcome. In 1911 there was a dock strike and suddenly in the hot days of August, when the unsafe conditions in the Bermondsey jam and biscuit factories became appalling, 12,000 women walked out on strike, initially in solidarity with the men but soon listing all the grievances of their own. Ada called in the famous trade union organiser, Mary Macarthur, and organised a rally in Southwark Park where Sylvia Pankhurst braved the disapproval of Emmeline and Christabel by speaking on behalf of the strikers.

Later, in the 1912 dock strike, Ada organised food relief for dockers' families all along the river from London Bridge to Woolwich. Subsequently she was made an honorary member of the transport workers' union, now Unite, as well as being honoured by the union which later became the GMB.

In 1913 Ada completed a project of which she was particularly proud. She set up a co-operative which at first was just a bakery but later was a supplier of a wide range of groceries. After extensive fund-raising (at which Ada was an expert) the local ILP had bought a bakery but only so as to run it as a co-operative with the participation of the workforce. This was ethical socialism in miniature and she remained chair of this model co-operative for many years. It prefigured the humane socialism of the future within the direst slums of the here and now.

In 1914 Ada was elected president of the Women's Labour League, head of all the Labour

women in Britain, but her term of office was blighted by the outbreak of war. She could not persuade the WLL to oppose the war as she and the ILP did, or support conscientious objectors. During the war she travelled to conferences in Bern and Zimmerwald to try and stop the war but without success.

After the war her fortunes revived. Women were allowed to vote and there was widespread disillusionment with the war which placed those who had opposed it in a favourable light. In 1922, when the ILP swept to power in Bermondsey, she became the first woman mayor in London and first labour woman mayor in Britain. To the outrage of her opponents, she flew the red flag over Bermondsey Town Hall.

The victory was Ada's chance to transform or demolish the slums, her original aim in coming to London in 1896. She forced through, against Conservative and Liberal opposition, the building of 52 model council houses in Wilson Grove. They were a good example of ethical socialism in action, prefiguring the future society. Ada told the architect she appointed not only to maximise light and greenness (gardens front and back) but to agree all the details of his plans with the working-class women who would live there.

Those slums she could not demolish she transformed by means of her famous 'beautification committee'. She planted 7,000 trees along the dingy streets of the slums and covered the borough with flowers, children's playgrounds, art and music. Municipal representatives came from all over Europe, even from the USA, to admire Ada's housing initiatives and to this day there are beautification committees in the USA descended from Ada's inspiration.

From 1934, when Labour, led by Herbert Morrison, won control of the London County Council and Ada became vice-chair of Parks and Open Spaces (a paid post with real power), she was able to spread beautification all over London. As president of the National Gardens Guild in 1931-34 she extended her beautification schemes all over the country and made use of the BBC to further her campaigns.

Politically, the 1930s were disastrous for Ada. She had always worked well with all on the left. In 1908-09, for example, she had struck up a strong relationship with the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. In 1926 she and Alfred passionately supported the general strike and worked with the Communists in Southwark. But the situation deteriorated in the late 1920s as Labour became ever more anti-Communist and the Communists became ever more sectarian. Ada's ILP found itself crushed between a Labour Party funded by the trade unions and a Communist Party funded by Moscow.

In 1932 the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party which was heartbreaking for Ada, a Labour councillor, and Alfred, a Labour MP. Ada joined the Socialist League, put together by the Labour Party Marxist, Stafford Cripps, but by 1937 this had failed too, leaving behind it only a left-wing journal, *Tribune*.

The final blow to the Salters came in 1939, when war was declared. Like Roosevelt, Stalin, the Communists and some old ILPers such as James Maxton, they were opposed to the war, which they regarded as imperialist. They found themselves at odds, not just with the Labour Party (again) but with many old ILPers who supported the war (such as Brockway, Bertrand Russell and George Orwell.)

Alfred predicted there would be no attempt to help Czechoslovakia or Poland, that millions of Jews would be killed by Hitler and, at the end of the war, whether Hitler or Stalin won, a dictatorship would rule from Berlin to Siberia. Millions would die, he said, and this time not only soldiers, but civilians.

During the war many of Ada's tree-lined streets, houses and children's playgrounds were bombed. To the outsider it might seem as if her life had been in vain but she never accepted that. The ILP had fulfilled its stated historical mission, from 1893 on, of bringing Britain to adult suffrage and a welfare state. What is more, the ILP project was as much to change hearts and minds, and prefigure the future, as it was to change structures.

Ada would not have been surprised to learn that in the future Alfred's huge practice, dispensing free medicine, would be praised as 'building an NHS before the NHS', nor that she would be praised for being a 'green before the Greens'. Somebody had to be the pioneer. Somebody had to descend from theory and show the world what could be done in practice.

****Graham also referred to Salter's work at the Bermondsey Settlement: '... a full-blown further education college founded in Bermondsey in 1891. It taught the working class of Bermondsey not only technical courses (metal-work, woodwork, technology) and commercial courses (office skills) but also literature, philosophy and the arts (lectures, for example, on George Eliot and Dickens and, famously, a class teaching Classical Greek that was run for one student only "because he expressed a passionate interest in it"). This was part of the Nonconformist tradition that is rarely mentioned in histories of education. Ada took classes at the Bermondsey Settlement from 1897 until around 1898.'***