

FRANCESCA WILSON IN PEACE AND WAR

Siân Roberts

'In my farewell speech I promised them that I would tell England about them – their talents, their vitality and the wretchedness of being homeless in the world.'



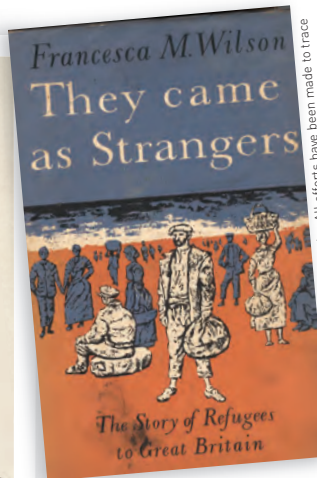
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Restored in 2011 and in the ownership of Folkestone Town Council, *The Landing of the Belgian Refugees* by Fredro Franzoni, 1915, hangs in Folkestone Town Hall. Some 64,000 Belgians sought refuge in the town.

This promise was made by a Birmingham teacher at Föhrenwald Displaced Persons Camp outside Munich in 1946. Her name was Francesca Wilson (1888–1981) and she had spent the previous year working on behalf of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) with survivors of Dachau concentration camp. Francesca's journey to Föhrenwald was only the most recent episode in a remarkable life dedicated to the relief of civilians displaced by war. She is one of a number of Birmingham women who were active in international humanitarian causes in the first half of the twentieth century, many of them Quakers, whose stories deserve to be better known.

A Quaker Heritage

Francesca was born into a middle-class Quaker family in Newcastle upon Tyne on 1 January 1888, and although in later life she herself had an ambiguous relationship to religion, much of her humanitarian motivation can be traced to her Quaker heritage. Her own educational aspirations were encouraged by her father Robert, a pacifist with an international outlook. He ensured that Francesca received an advanced education for a girl at the time: she attended the Central Newcastle High School for Girls, then Newnham College, Cambridge. Whilst teaching in Gravesend during the First World War she became involved with Belgian refugees, an encounter which had a long-lasting impact. She temporarily



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Above: Francesca Wilson campaigned tirelessly for the stateless. *They Came as Strangers* was published by Hamish Hamilton during 'World Refugee Year' in 1959.

Left: During the Spanish Civil War, Francesca Wilson's articles helped to establish local funding for relief schemes.

abandoned her teaching career to undertake relief work abroad, initially with children in France and subsequently with wounded and displaced Serbs in Corsica, North Africa and Serbia. In 1919 she joined Dr. Hilda Clark's Quaker Relief Mission in Vienna where she spent three years organising food depots and working closely with the newly formed Save the Children Fund, before embarking on famine relief work with a Quaker team in Russia in 1922-1923.

On her return to England she settled in Birmingham and resumed her teaching career as a history mistress at Edgbaston Church of England College for Girls. She maintained her humanitarian interests by opening her home in Edgbaston throughout the 1920s to a succession of Russian *émigré* children whom she 'adopted' for varying periods of time. During the 1930s she became increasingly concerned about the development of fascism in Europe and again opened her home, this time to refugees; the best known was the art historian Nikolaus Pevsner.

Spain and Refugees

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War prompted a return to active relief work. In March 1937 Francesca travelled to Spain on behalf of the Society of Friends with her friend Helen Grant, a lecturer in Spanish at the University of Birmingham. The Spanish Republican Government's reputation for progressive educational initiatives was one of the attractions of their cause for British supporters. Francesca toured model schools and was deeply impressed by the educational colonies established by the Spanish Government to house thousands of children evacuated to the relative safety of the Republican zone in Eastern Spain.

Francesca stayed in Spain and travelled south to Murcia where, as the first foreign relief worker on the scene, she found a city overwhelmed by refugees fleeing Franco's attack on Malaga.

She established feeding programmes, founded a children's hospital, ran occupational workshops to train displaced men and women in useful trades, and set up two educational colonies for children affected by bombing. During this period she travelled regularly between Birmingham and Spain and much of her funding for relief work came as a result of her articles and appeals in the national press and the Quaker periodical *The Friend*, and talks given locally. Local organisations such as the Birmingham Council for Peace and Liberty were supportive, as were Birmingham Quakers who funded two educational colonies in Spain during the war – 'Colonia Birmingham' at Rubí outside Barcelona and Caldas de Malavella near Gerona. Francesca delivered emergency feeding aid where necessary but, typically, her activities in Spain focused on attempting to establish sustainable relief schemes. They emphasised educational or occupational training, and agricultural initiatives to create long-term benefits.

After the fall of the Spanish Republic to Franco's forces in 1939, Francesca followed the Spanish refugees into France and undertook similar relief schemes in Perpignan. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War she was sent by the Quakers and the Polish Relief Fund to Hungary in October 1939 to assist Polish refugees, but had to leave hurriedly the following May due to her involvement with the refugee underground movement and arrest by the Hungarian secret police. During the war she worked for refugee organisations in the UK until 1945 when she joined UNRRA as a senior welfare worker at Föhrenwald.

Educating the Public

Throughout her life Francesca was a prolific author of biographical and historical works, reportage, and policy documents on relief. Several of her books were written with the intention of educating the public about the plight of civilians caught in war and advocating her particular brand of relief. In the 1940s she published two autobiographical accounts in which she recounted her experiences from the First World War to her return to England from Hungary, and described her experiences in Föhrenwald. Thus she kept her promise of 1946.

Francesca continued to publicise the cause of stateless 'displaced persons' caught in European camps well into the 1950s, and during 'World Refugee Year' in 1959-1960 she published *They Came as Strangers: The Story of Refugees to Great Britain*, dedicated to 'all the Exiles who have enlivened my Home'. Her aims were to increase public understanding of refugee issues, promote tolerance, and advocate legislation that was favourable to the reception of refugees. By emphasising the contribution that refugees had made to the UK over centuries, she hoped to convince the British public that 'if we cast up our balance sheet we will find that we have gained far more than we have given'. Francesca died in London on 4 March 1981. ●

Dr Siân Roberts is a Collection Curator at the Library of Birmingham.

Further Reading

Siân Roberts, 'Wilson, Francesca Mary' in *Oxford DNB*. Freely available online with your public library card at www.oxforddnb.com

Siân Roberts, 'Place, Life Histories and the Politics of Relief: Episodes in the life of Francesca Wilson, Humanitarian Educator Activist' (unpublished PhD thesis University of Birmingham, 2010). Online at www.etheses.bham.ac.uk/848/1/Roberts10PhD_A1a.pdf