

The Woman Who Saved The Children

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One summer Sunday, in 1922, a middle-aged woman climbed Mount Salève, outside Geneva, in her long skirts and tightly laced boots. Eglantyne Jebb had wanted to clear her mind. Settling down on the crisp turf at the mountain's summit, her auburn hair catching in the breeze, she looked down over the international city. The lake was filled with barges ferrying construction materials for the new League of Nations building. How different the world could be, Jebb thought, if all individual children, everywhere, were party to the same universal human rights. Within days, she had drafted a simple statement of children's human rights, which she then shepherded through the League of Nations. In 1924, after considerable debate, Jebb's pioneering statement was adopted as the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It has since evolved into the UN Convention, the most universally accepted legally binding human rights instrument in history.

Eglantyne Jebb was used to overcoming resistance to her pioneering ideas. While enjoying a privileged upbringing, she had also been raised with a strong sense of social duty. In 1913 she had travelled to the warzone in the Balkans to distribute aid. The suffering, fear and lack of human empathy she witnessed would stay with her for the rest of her life. 'The only international language in the world, is a child's cry,' she wrote when this regional conflict escalated into the First World War.

After the armistice, Jebb protested against the British government's policy to continue the economic blockade to Europe while peace terms were being discussed. She knew the human cost of such a strategy was the needless deaths of hundreds of children every week. A few days later she was arrested for distributing leaflets in London's central Trafalgar Square. One account has her chalking her message onto the pavements, suffragette style. Determined to make the most of the publicity around her court case, Jebb insisted on conducting her own defence. Focusing on the moral case, she gave the court reporters plenty to fill their columns with. Although found guilty, she was fined just five pounds, 'the equivalent of victory' as she wrote gleefully to her mother. The court prosecutor then pressed a five-pound note into her hands, making clear that she had won the moral case. Insisting that she would pay her own fine, Jebb declared that she would put his five pounds towards a new fund – to save the children.

The next day, the story had made the British frontpages. Determined to exploit the publicity, Jebb and her sister, Dorothy Buxton, quickly organised a public meeting in London's prestigious Royal Albert Hall. It was there, on 19 May 1919, that the two women launched

'Save the Children'. 'Surely,' Jebb told the packed hall, 'it is impossible for us, as normal human beings, to watch children starve to death without making an effort to save them.' After a phenomenal response, the following year Jebb set up the International Save the Children Alliance in Geneva. Two years later, she was dreaming up the unheard-of concept of child rights at the top of Mont Salève.

Eglantyne Jebb was never afraid to push the boundaries of accepted ideas. If the facts of her story continue to touch the imagination, it is not only because of the importance of her legacy in the Save the Children movement and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, but also because of the force of her character, and the truths she recognised about human community. 'We want men and women everywhere,' she wrote, 'to take up their stand on the common, simple things of everyday life which should unite us all'. Jebb's vision, passion and compassion, are as needed as ever today - as the Declaration of the Rights of the Child marks its centenary.