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Marie Butts and Quakerism (summary)

Marie Butts (1870-1953) was a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), active in the Geneva group from 1926 until her death. She was an author of children's books, a translator, a teacher of English language and literature, and a director of a home for young working women, before becoming Secretary General of the International Bureau of Education (IBE) in 1925. In the academic world, Marie Butts is known for her contribution to comparative pedagogy.

Her personality is summed up in a few words by a member of the Quaker group in Geneva: "mischievous eye, irrepressible sense of humour, unvarnished directness".



IBE, 1925

Childhood and professional career

Marie Butts was born in 1870 in Thonon, Haute-Savoie, to Scottish and French parents. She is a British citizen and is perfectly bilingual. She studied in Lausanne in a school where the teaching methods favoured the development of the pupils.

Marie Butts began teaching English language and literature in Lausanne in 1895. For her, "language lessons must become a means of culture to open the minds of pupils". She set up meetings where young girls could come and talk freely about subjects that interested them and "saw with joy the opening of her pupils' minds, their attention focused on problems that had previously been carefully dismissed by those around them". Hélène Monastier, a central figure of Quakerism in Switzerland, was one of her pupils.

In 1918 she felt the need to leave Lausanne and its privileged environment. She went to the United States for a few months, then to Paris where she attended a social school and joined the Socialist Party. Wishing to devote herself to the working class, she took charge of a home for young women in Rouen from 1920 to 1924.

In 1925, she was called to Geneva to take up the post of Secretary General of the International Bureau of Education (IBE), which had just been founded by a group led by Pierre Bovet and Adolphe Ferrière of the Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pierre Bovet will write that Marie Butts' commitment was decisive for the future of the IBE.

Marie Butts became fully involved in this international network, first under the direction of Pierre Bovet and then of Jean Piaget from 1929 onwards. Her work consisted of organising and managing documentation, writing the IBE Bulletin, taking part in congresses



Sitting: Pierre Bovet, Marie Butts, Jean-Louis Claparède

and following educational developments in the IBE member states. She was Secretary General until 1948, and a volunteer until her death. In 1947, Marie Butts participated in the Constituent Conference of UNESCO in London, as an observer.

The founders of the IBE were themselves close to the Quakers. The Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau welcomed the Geneva Quaker group to its premises in 1920. Elisabeth Rotten, deputy director, was in contact with the Quakers from 1920. Blanche Schaffer-Weber, at the IBE from 1930 to 1940, became a member in 1932. Jaro Kose, member of the IBE Governing Board, became a Quaker in Geneva in 1926. Edmond Privat, a member of the IBE Committee, was a Quaker since 1936.

Marie Butts was awarded the title of Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland in 1947. The following year she was awarded the title of Dr *honoris causa* by the University of Geneva.

Publications and translations

Marie Butts adapted old French tales published between 1910 and 1928, which have become classics of children's literature. She wrote *Héros ! épisodes de la grande guerre*, published in 1915. In 1925-1929 two volumes of *Récits des temps bibliques* were published.

She made translations, notably of the works of H.G. Wells. In 1942 she translated two books by leading Quaker figures: Rufus Jones' *A dynamic faith* and Thomas R. Kelly's *A testament of devotion*. Marie Butts found Kelly's translation terribly difficult, not finding the words in French, not being "mystical enough" to translate some passages. In 1948 she translated a suite of six studies by Carl Heath, the originator of the International Quaker Centres.

Marie Butts and the Quakers

Marie Butts' early religious background was in the Brethren Church in England, but her parents joined the Scottish Church in Lausanne at an early age. During the First World War, Marie Butts became increasingly dissatisfied, she felt that the progressive spirit of Christ was not expressed, that barriers existed between this Christianity and the working world. She finally decided to leave organised Christianity.

After the war, she became aware of Quaker relief efforts and appreciated their pacifist stance. Marie Butts was active in the Geneva Quaker group from 1925. She became a member of the Religious Society of Friends in 1926, at the age of 56. She was particularly interested in social issues, she took part in the first Quaker meetings in Switzerland, and she served as Geneva clerk from 1936-1938. The largest number of references to Marie Butts are to "study groups": Bible studies, Söderblom Circle, meetings on "the Individual and the State", education group. She participated as much as possible in all the monthly business meetings.

In 1937, the Centre, the Group and the Quaker Hostel moved to the Palais Wilson. The IBE secretariat and the Rousseau Institute also moved there. Marie Butts lived in two rooms in the Hostel.

During her exile in Britain, from 1940 onwards, Marie Butts continued to attend Quaker meetings for worship. Her correspondence with the IBE in 1940-46 mentions no less than 60 people known to Quakers in Switzerland, including 37 members.



The hall of the Quaker Hostel in 1938

She was nearly 76 years old when she returned to Geneva in 1946. The group is happy to have "her lights and great experience" back. Business meetings were held at her home from

October 1946 to April 1947. Marie Butts is again very active in the study groups. She led the "spiritual healing" group, which in 1952 became an intercession group for the sick.

In the UK during the war

The correspondence with the IBE secretariat during the Second World War¹ shows Marie Butts' interests, her character, her dreams. The letters also tell of times of retreat, rest, humour and mood swings.

When Marie Butts left Geneva on 3 May 1940, she was nearly 70 years old. Geneva was now empty of its international population. She writes that her nephew implores her to stay in Britain, while others think Geneva is safer: "Who knows? And who cares about personal safety? What I do care about is my work and I am very much annoyed at being out from you at the Bureau".

Marie Butts has travelled around Britain more than 30 times in six years, to some 20 different locations. She spent her summers at her niece's home in Longmorn in the north of Scotland. She was in Edinburgh, in Birmingham at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in 1940-41, in Tewin (Hertfordshire) in 1942-43 with a Quaker family. She then lived mainly in London.

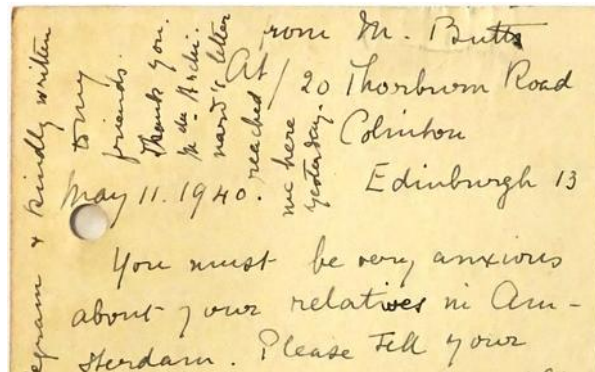
The Woodbrooke Study Centre awarded a scholarship to Marie Butts, who received a 'Certificate of Theology'. She was offered a scholarship to teach at Woodbrooke : she turned it down as the climate did not suit her.

The war. In a letter dated 23 May 1940, Marie Butts shares her dismay: "*I realise that I am very lucky. But if we could get back all of us to useful, constructive work how fine it would be. As things are, life is not worth living. I believe this will not last; I am hopeful*".

Marie Butts writes of the bombing in 1940: 'A hell of a time', and more pragmatically: 'The Alexander's who lost their windows will be in Woobrooke from January 1st'.

End of 1941: "It seems to me that it must be very difficult in the countries that have been spared (...) to realise that the pre-1940 world is dead, (...) that civilisation will have to embark on completely new paths, difficult, very difficult to discover, that the mentality in the various countries will be profoundly modified, that it already is". November 1942: "I still have to fight a lot against depression".

Marie Butts learns of the death of a young Swiss volunteer in the RAF. "I am very sure that God never wanted this horrible war, that He never wanted any war, that He never wanted the sacrifice of millions of beautiful young lives. Can we believe that He agrees with the method of government of our States, with its excessive ambitions, its lack of scruples, its cruelty, which end up leading to a Hitler, to a Himmler, to an Abetz?" August 1944: "I am sure that the means one employs are always as important as the goal one aims at (...) Do we know whether the reasonable and internationalist elements will have the upper hand in the reconstruction of the world?".



Beginning of a letter dated 11 May 1940

¹Archives de l'Institut Jean-Jacques Rousseau (AIJRR). Fonds Anne Hamori : Papiers de Marie Butts. Dossier 4 : Correspondance 1940-1946, env. 5 cm [AIJRR/2008/3/A].

In July 1945, the IBE leadership was due to come to London as part of the talks leading up to UNESCO's constitution. The plan to integrate the IBE into a larger international framework became crucial (it would not become a reality until 1969). Marie Butts was worried: "This is not the London of pre-war times! Everything is difficult and long and complicated." The British exile was also the occasion for her to vote for the first time, in July 1945, for a woman.

Health problems. By October 1940, Marie Butts claims to be constantly suffering from rheumatism, which is made worse by the British climate. She found it increasingly difficult to write her letters, and often asked the IBE secretaries to answer for her. She took a spa treatment at Droitwich in the summer of 1941. In May 1942 she reported "deformities and pain in my right hand (...) Writing is torture. I can hardly hold my pen." The travel and activities exhausted her. Shortly before her return to Switzerland, she wrote: "I get so tired so quickly." She was almost 76 years old at the time.

The Bureau. An article from 2020 gives detailed information on the IBE's action during the war². The Bureau does not make any political or militant statements, however its actors have shown their commitment to pacifism since its creation in 1925. A "Service for the Intellectual Assistance of Prisoners of War" was set up to provide educational opportunities for teachers and students in captivity (military and civilian). Packages of books were sent to the camps through representatives of the National Red Cross. Marie Butts coordinates the service from England. In total, almost 600,000 books will be sent.



Tributes

Rachel Gampert wrote an obituary in *Le mouvement féministe*, saying that Marie Butts had "an extraordinarily open and generous mind. (...) She had a great power of work and a vast culture. (...) A member of the Society of Friends (Quakers), she had gradually acquired the serenity of those who believe in eternal things."

Albert Picot, State Councillor in Geneva, President of the IBE Executive Board, says that Marie Butts "was one of the pioneers of the IBE, creating the technique of international collaboration in education. Pioneer is too weak a word: she was the driving force behind the cause of education at the international level, at a time when the usefulness of this

orientation was still being questioned."

Alan Haigh, on behalf of the Elders of the Geneva Quaker Group, writes that it is difficult to measure all that the group owes to Marie Butts. He mentions her qualities: moral integrity, courage, loyalty, insight and punctuality, and her deep knowledge of French and English culture. "She embodied the ideal of Quakerism in the eyes of many."

Michel Mégard, July 2022

This article is a condensed version of a longer text (23 pages, in French), including a list of sources and annotations, with brief biographies of the people quoted.

²Cécile Boss et Émeline Brylinski, « Le Service d'aide intellectuelle aux prisonniers de guerre du [BIE] (1939-1945) », in Droux et Hofstetter 2020, p. 243-276.