

Remembering the Domestic

Rose Dabney Forbes and the Future of Female Biographies

Catherine Devlin [University of Glasgow]

Abstract

Female activism performed within the home, such as raising money or awareness through parlor meetings, remains overlooked in historiography. As a result, there are almost no secondary accounts of Rose Dabney Forbes, a celebrated peace activist and suffrage leader. In this paper, I bring light to archival material that chronicles the life of a woman who was prominent for her time yet quickly forgotten. In doing so, I seek to both ensure that Forbes' life is not forgotten and to showcase a feminist historiographic approach that challenges gender binaries, particularly around the concept of domestic activism.

Introduction

No one can predict whom history will remember, but none of Boston's twentieth-century elite would have expected Rose Dabney Forbes (1864 -1947) to be forgotten. A prominent socialite and celebrated activist, Forbes served as an officer of the Massachusetts Peace Society, the chairman of the Massachusetts branch of the Women's Peace Party, and on the advisory council of the World Peace Foundation. She dined with U.S. presidents, hosted European nobility, and influenced almost all of Boston's major Progressive Era movements, from education reform to suffrage. Yet, while Forbes is mentioned in self-published works such as Joseph Abdo's *On the Edge of History: the Story of the Dabney Family on the Island of Faial in the Azores Archipelago* and is referenced as part of broader academic works such as David S. Patterson's *The Search for Negotiated Peace: Women's Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in WWI*, her story has yet to be foregrounded in academic literature. Instead, her name is reduced to an archival folder at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The fact that her story can be uncovered at all speaks to her privilege as a wealthy, white woman. Her documents were saved, when the voices of countless queer folks and people of color's were discarded or never recorded at all. Furthermore, as the heiress to a family that grew rich on colonial exploitation through opium and tea trade, her legacy must acknowledge the depth of her privilege. Nonetheless, recovering Forbes' story allows us to better question gendered binaries within academic remembrance of activism.

In this paper, I apply feminist methods to archival-based biography as I examine why Rose Dabney Forbes, a hugely prominent woman for her time, was so quickly forgotten. I primarily cite the Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This archival collection

chronicles Forbes' contributions to the Massachusetts peace movement through meeting records, speech transcripts, and peace society literature. When viewed through a feminist lens, Forbes' archival collection offers insight into how Gilded Age female activists made change within and because of their society.

Forbes' activism consisted of donating and hosting. Her donations kept alive multiple peace organizations, and she used her social and financial capital to influence male dominated spaces. To forget Rose Dabney Forbes and her fellow peace activists is to deny the powerful work they undertook from within their gendered society. By tackling international issues from parlor meetings, these women disproved the separate spheres and the gendered binary of public versus private roles. They did not need to enter traditionally 'male' spaces to enter political conversations, and they wielded social networks (often dismissed as trivial) to benefit their causes. Their absence in the historiographic record is shaped by a Western devaluation of female social activism. By recognizing Rose Dabney Forbes as an activist, this article begins to reframe how we write biographies in a way that moves away from male-dominated narratives. Of course, the work of shedding light on forgotten figures must continue across marginalized communities, including recovering stories the historical record has more deeply erased, such as women of color and queer voices.

Summary of Forbes' Life and Activism

Although she spent most of her life directing Boston's activist and social scenes, Forbes was born and grew up on Fayal Island, Portugal. In remembering Forbes' life, we must acknowledge her proximity to U.S. imperial projects. She was the daughter of U.S. Consul to the Azores, Samuel Wyllys Dabney, and his socialite wife, Sarah Hickling Dabney. In 1892, at the age of twenty-eight, Rose moved to Milton, Massachusetts to marry J. Malcolm Forbes, a member of a prominent Boston family who made their fortune in the opium and tea trade with China (*The New York Times* 1904). Rose was Malcolm's second wife, and the couple had one daughter: Alice Hathaway Forbes. Malcolm died in 1904 after suffering from what his obituary called an 'internal malady' (*The New York Times* 1904). Rose never remarried.

Forbes dedicated her adult life to activism. While many wealthy Bostonian women were philanthropists, the proliferation of Forbes' activism was noteworthy even for her era and class. Among other roles, Forbes served on the executive boards of the National Committee for Constructive Immigration Legislation and the Foreign Policy Association of Massachusetts, and she was a member of the Boston league of Women's Voters, the Milton Women's Club, and the Women's National Committee for Law Enforcement. Her greatest passion, however, was the peace movement. In 1911, she revived the Massachusetts Peace Society alongside Dr. William Mowry and Reverend Samuel Bushnell (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 1). Forbes was the only woman on the establishing committee, and she subsequently served on the Board of Directors (Rose Dabney Forbes

Papers, Box 1 Folder 1). Because Massachusetts was the largest – and most powerful - branch of the American Peace Society, Forbes' influence from this role extended beyond the state. Forbes was further involved in the peace movement as a member of the advisory council for the World Peace Foundation, the main benefactor of the American School Peace League, and the chairman of the Massachusetts Branch of the Woman's Peace Party (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 1). Studying Forbes' activism – and why it was forgotten – reveals misconceptions about the passivity of female dominated forms of activism such as parlor meetings. Wealthy women sharing dinner may not appear to be a political event, but these evenings legitimized causes, enabled female political participation despite societal subordination, and led to great social change. Including these women in the historical record establishes a more accurate view of Gilded Age politics and gendered power negotiations, as women influenced international affairs from within their supposedly separate spheres.

Remembering Feminist Domestic Activism

The Massachusetts Peace Society (MAPS) claimed to be open 'any person who believes that war between nations ought to be abolished' (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 1). The only caveat: they had to pay the membership fee. The twentieth-century peace movement was visibly populated by upper class Bostonians who promoted the peace cause via parlor meetings and hefty donations. These activists used class to encourage discussions about pacifism and push forward the peace agenda. Rose Dabney Forbes' activism via parlour meetings and monetary donations, a form of social change often obscured or overlooked in historical memory, provides evidence for recent feminist studies of domestic feminist activism.

Since 1960, feminist scholars across the humanities have interrogated the usefulness of separate spheres as a framework for understanding nineteenth-century female activity. In her 2010 survey of the field of American women's history, Andrea Merrett noted that scholars have trended towards recognizing separate spheres as describing spatial divisions rather than differences in motivations or activities. Merrett explained that historians in the late twentieth-century recognized that the 'boundaries of everyday life were more porous' than originally assumed, yet nonetheless still identified female culture sprouting from physical, domestic spaces (Merrett 2010, p. 1). This perspective negated the idea that the domestic placement of many upper-class women meant their separation from ideological and political movements. Judy Giles' 2005 text, *The Parlour and the Suburb*, used the term 'domestic modernity' to argue that private spaces occupied by women played as large a role in developing modernity as public spaces occupied by men (Giles 2005). Susan Fraiman pushed understandings of domestic complexity even further by introducing the idea of 'extreme domesticity,' a term she used to 'decouple domestic spaces, figures, and duties from necessary identification with conservative "family values" in order to highlight the diversity of thought demonstrated by those in the domestic sphere' (2017, p. 3). In this article, I use Forbes' work

with the Massachusetts Peace movement to add to agree with these scholars' dismissal of separate spheres by demonstrating the politicization of the domestic amongst Boston's upper classes.

MAPS hosted lavish events as a means of gaining support, communicating respectability, and promoting involvement. As one of its most prominent members, Rose Dabney thrived as a hostess. From formal academic speakers to anti-war knitting circles, Forbes opened her home to myriad peace events (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 3). In one instance, when a friend worried about how to best host a peace gathering, Forbes promised to help her plan every step of the way and even offered up her own house if needed (Rose Dabney Forbes to Mrs. Gorham, 16 August 1912, Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 3).

For her class, Forbes' enthusiasm for hosting does not indicate frivolity. Across Gilded Age activist movements, upper-class women wielded the social tools available to them to further political causes. Nineteenth-century American norms encouraged women to focus on domestic rather than external concerns, but by connecting social events to political causes, women advocated for their goals without alienating potential allies by infringing on gender roles. These parlor meetings signaled that a cause was supported by the upper class, thus creating an air of respectability and exclusivity. However, their gatekeeping demonstrates classism, which precludes these women from being considered true feminists by modern parameters. Intersectional feminism recognizes that overlapping systems of oppression cannot be isolated, and feminism cannot succeed unless we address all forms of discrimination. Therefore, by upholding class inequity, these hostesses contributed to systemic oppression. Nonetheless, their tactics succeeded in reaching short-term goals for their causes. For example, at an 1894 parlor meeting philanthropist Olivia Sage secured over two-hundred signatures for a petition to remove references to sex from the New York state constitution in order to allow women greater political influence (Crocker 2006). Hostessing as a form of activism might appear to be a compromise: women who could not enter public politics found a way to create change from their private homes. Yet, such movements radically disprove the concept of domesticity as its own sphere. By politicizing their homes, Gilded Age women showed that there was no impenetrable border between public and private. In appearing to work within their social boundaries, they disproved the system altogether.

Forbes' hostessing demonstrates this subversion. The speakers who visited Forbes' home included some of the most hotly debated public figures of her day. For example, on December 12, 1912, Forbes opened her home to Bertha von Suttner, Baroness of Austria. A case study in the success of Forbes' peace-promoting hostessing, the Baroness' visit to Massachusetts represented a female-dominated, upper class evening indicative of how Forbes and her peers used their class and gender roles to advocate for peace. The first woman to win the Noble Peace Prize, the Baroness explained that she had come to the United States to implore help from 'this young country...which has shown

that its ideals are for the happiness, not only of its own race, but of all races' (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, 'Meeting of the Massachusetts Peace Society at Mrs. Malcolm Forbes). A modern perspective puts the Baroness' idealistic view of America into major question. Her comments on the happiness of all races seem particularly out of place in this era of intense Jim Crow. However, the fact that the Baroness' speech was a concrete call to action demonstrates the value of parlor meetings. The Baroness did not consider her presence to be solely for entertainment purposes but rather foresaw genuine change from this social event.

Despite the fact that the evening was made possible and led by women, one of the speakers – Professor George Blakeslee – spent most of his speech praising American manhood. Blakeslee clearly recognized that women dominated the evening; he thanked 'Mrs. Forbes for the opportunity to be together' and declared the Baroness to be 'possibly the most distinguished representative of Europe,' so his speech's content says more about who we assign credit to on a larger scale than his personal feelings (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, 'Meeting of the Massachusetts Peace Society at Mrs. Malcolm Forbes). History has decided that soldiers make for more compelling narratives than hostesses. The entire evening was run and centered around women, yet the stories remained male-focused as history remains.

Donations are another form of female activism that lacks compelling optics, but social movements cannot exist without financial backing. Susan B. Anthony, the epitome of a marching and orating activist, complained that 'more than half of my spiritual, intellectual and physical strength has been expended in the anxiety of getting the money to pay for the Herculean work that has to be done.' Donations from wealthy women were especially necessary to sustain female-led activist movements. While male-led causes received donations from both women and men, very few men donated to female causes (Johnson 2017). The emphasis that historians (and women of the time, as seen by Anthony's above quote) place on the need for female donations to the suffrage movements suggests that the female vote could not have been won at all without the support of rich women. With this claim, I do not intend to negate the contributions towards women's rights made by working-class women. As Rebecca Mead helpfully summarizes in *How the West was Won: Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868-1914*: 'Working-class women voted and ran for office within their unions, went on strike, supported labor parties and candidates, and lobbied for legislation' in the name of suffrage (2004, p.2). Nonetheless, efforts of upper-class women were perhaps an intrinsic, inevitable facet of Gilded Age activism.

In addition to sustaining such movements, wealthy women greatly shaped the trajectory of the causes they donated to. Many donors gave their money conditionally, forcing movements to meet a set of demands in order to receive the cash. When the incredibly wealthy Fanny Garrison Villard became chair of the Women's Peace Society, Elinor Byrnes (who wrote most of the group's

ideological statements and pamphlets) resented the power that Villard's purse strings gave her over the direction of the society (Alonso 1993). Such conditions allowed women to influence activist movements without having titled positions. In this way, they skirted male authority. Women who gave to causes that were not run by women – such as colleges or libraries – greatly affected these male-dominated institutions.

Rose Dabney Forbes donated frequently to the peace cause. Her correspondence records are filled with letters thanking her for her generosity. Forbes financially backed MAPS activities with everything from straightforward monetary donations to furnishing peace offices with desks and filing cabinets to gifting ornate peace society pins (James Tryon to Rose Dabney Forbes, Rose Dabney Forbes Papers Box 1 Folder 3, Henry Haskin to Rose Dabney Forbes, Rose Dabney Forbes Papers Box 1 Folder 3, Samuel Capen to Rose Dabney Forbes, Rose Dabney Forbes Papers Box 1 Folder 2). Even practical gifts sometimes came with implications for her vision for the direction of the movement. The filing cabinet, for instance, signaled a suggestion that the organization put more emphasis on 'having everything well systematized' (James Tryon to Rose Dabney Forbes, Rose Dabney Forbes Papers Box 1 Folder 3). Furthermore, Forbes was the main financial backer of the American School Peace League. Forbes corresponded frequently with Fannie Fern Andrews (the founder of the American School Peace League) thus showing her an active role in League projects, even as she is remembered only as a donor. Forbes's donations were so integral to the success of the American School Peace League that its demise is directly tied to her withdrawal of financial support in 1929. Much of the literature from the Massachusetts Peace Society mentions Forbes primarily to thank her for monetary contributions. Yet while such donations are often dismissed as passive, Forbes joined a network of Gilded Age women who strategically provided money as a means of exercising social control and pushing forward activism agendas. Through parlor meetings and charitable contributions, these women built movements and subverted gender roles.

Remembering a Peace Activist Who Supported a World War

Despite dedicating most of her life to promoting peace, Forbes supported the United States' entrance into World War I. While initially condemning the war, Forbes scaled down her protests as the nation increasingly labeled dissenters as dangerous traitors. Forbes rationalized her decisions to tone down war protests by arguing that it was better to win a just, defensible, and lasting peace than to insist on ending the war at any cost. Deeply nationalistic and committed to her social standing, Forbes bought into a xenophobic notion of the United States spreading the light of democracy through the war. She did so at the expense of the cause she had dedicated her life to. Feminist scholarship rightly condemns imperialism and argues that, in the vein of intersectionality, a fight against one kind of oppression requires a fight against all oppression. As Angela Davis notes in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Robin Riley's anthology *Feminism and War*, "the tradition of feminism is linked to

all the important social movements – against racism, against imperialism, for labor rights, and so forth” (2008, p.2). Yet Forbes, a woman who proudly called herself a suffragist and pushed gendered boundaries through her peace leadership, supported the United States’ imperialistic endeavors during World War I. Remembering Forbes, therefore, provides an important data point for feminist literature concerning the relationship between class, gender, and imperialism. Applying a feminist lens to Forbes’ reaction to World War I requires accounting for gendered power dynamics when chronicling female reactions to the war while still holding individuals accountable for their roles in upholding oppression.

Forbes’ shift to supporting World War I was unequivocally a change in messaging. In fact, the Women’s Peace Party – for which Forbes served as the chairman of the Massachusetts Branch – was founded expressly as a reaction against the European conflict (Frahm 2005). Even when tensions continued to rise in the United States, Forbes’ correspondence shows her initial aversion to the United States joining the fighting. For example, a letter to Forbes from Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman Angell highlights the ‘absurdity of America’s joining in the war over the problems arising out of the destruction of the Lusitania’ (Norman Angell to Rose Dabney Forbes, 19 July. Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Reel 73.1). Yet the increasing likelihood of the United States joining the war did not go unnoticed by those connected to the peace cause, and some pacifist leaders began to strategize how to maintain their social standings and not alienate their peers. In a 1916 letter to Forbes, MAPS member (and later Paris Peace Conference delegate) Charles Homer Haskins explained that he felt it was important that MAPS did not come down too harshly against preparedness. ‘Our Society is on record as emphasizing a general constructive program rather than activities in opposition to preparedness,’ he reminded Forbes, a decision built on ‘the results of our referendum vote, which showed that a majority of our members were in favor of increasing our national armament’ (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers Box 1 Folder 5). In response, Forbes softened her stance against war preparedness. However, a feminist reading of Forbes’ response must account for gendered power dynamics. As the only woman on the MAPS board of directors, Forbes may very well have felt pressured to cave to male authority, and her decision could reflect strategic defense rather than a genuine change of heart.

Forbes scaled back her pacifist stance in the Women’s Peace Party as well, and the Massachusetts branch switched from anti-war advocacy to relief work. Forbes admitted that Massachusetts was ‘thought to be perhaps the most conservative’ of the WPP branches and that ‘some members are sorry and some glad of the accusation’ (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, A Few Words on the New Internationalism, Box 3 Folder 6). This straightforward report shows Forbes’ hesitancy to take a vocal stand on whether Massachusetts’ conservative reputation was for the best. Forbes did not shy away from coming down firmly on the side of peace during times when the cause was popular, so her timidity here shows how her desire to maintain likeability affected her activism. As such a

prominent member of Boston society, Forbes' taking a controversial stance might seriously have detracted from her social standing. Forbes was unwilling to take this risk.

Forbes' support of the war reveals her nationalistic and classist views of global populations. Forbes defended her acceptance of the United States' participation in World War I by arguing that it was better to have the war result in a permanent peace than to end the conflict quickly only to have aggression spring up again. She was especially concerned that the U.S. should not settle for 'a peace which shall fail to remove the menace of Prussian Military domination' (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, A Few Words on the New Internationalism, Box 3 Folder 6). Here, Forbes shows how her perception of different countries shaped her perspective on the war, using her mental hierarchy of nations to determine who deserved post-war power. Prior to the United States' involvement in the war, a 1914 MAPS pamphlet highlighted this sense of international responsibility saying, 'Americans feel strongly that America has a unique and influential place in the present crisis' (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 3). The pamphlet went on to praise America's role as a peacekeeper, pointing to the nation's neutrality and 'friendship and confidence of all the nations now at war' (Rose Dabney Forbes Papers, Box 1 Folder 3). Forbes' acceptance of this brand of nationalism adds evidence to the claims of feminist scholars who chronicle United States imperialism. For instance, in the introduction to *Feminism and War*, the authors explain that they focused the anthology around U.S. imperialism because:

Given the centrality of U.S. imperial wars in the world today, it is impossible to understand "feminism and war" on a global scale without understanding the specificities of the racist, heterosexist, and masculinized practices and ideologies mobilized by a USA in pursuit of economic and political hegemony (2008, pg.2).

Remembering Forbes, therefore, supports literature which attempts to unravel the connection between U.S. colonialism and other systems of oppression, as Forbes' xenophobia informed her decreased pacifism.

Conclusion

While Forbes' classism and nationalism preclude her from being remembered as a celebrated feminist, they do not justify her absence from the historical record. As stated in the conclusion to Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel's *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, to dismiss all women who were complicit in empire building:

'as racists and participants in contemporary imperialism without understanding their personal experiences and springs of motivation, their complexities and ambiguities, leaves us with labels, not history' (1992, p. 94).

As a visible, powerful member of her society, Forbes provides a window into the social mechanisms of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. Her influence over politics from within the

domestic realm disproves the notion of separate spheres, while her eventual decrease in pacifism reveals the depths of xenophobia among Gilded Age Boston's upper classes.

Forgetting Forbes and her fellow pacifists overlooks the subversive ways that Gilded Age women made change. As historians reconceptualize the notion of separate spheres and move away from viewing the domestic as an apolitical arena, Forbes' influential hosting adds evidence to the notion of parlour meetings as political sites. Forbes promoted peace by hosting informative and support-raising events, and she sustained and directed the Boston peace movement through targeted donations which financed organizations while dictating their priorities. Forbes used her money to consciously adjust peace operations according to her vision. In shaping the peace movement via parlor meetings and donations, Forbes disproved the notion of separate, gendered spheres. While fully operating within social constraints, Forbes engaged in public and political conversations.

Nonetheless, during World War I, Forbes caved to male authority and nationalism and altered her position on the United States' involvement in the war. Remembering Forbes therefore adds to feminist scholarship on the relationship between gender and imperialism, as Forbes' desire to maintain her social standing outweighed her pacifist advocacy. As the field of gender studies revisits who gets remembered, Forbes' story shows the value of examining lives beyond accepted historiographic structures and personas.

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