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Introduction

'Work! Work as though Earth and Heaven depended on it but do not work for fame or wealth or power: These – if they are for you – will come but not through seeking, for they are not ends but snares upon the way to tempt you'.

Never was there a worker such as Phoebe Cusden, who penned these lines, and she loved every minute of it.

Her life-work, put simply, was the good of humanity. Truly she loved the human race, and throughout her long life she did everything she could to make things better, for the world in general and everyone she ever met in particular. Not everybody loved her – she held strong opinions, and she was outspoken and forthright – but almost everyone did; even her opponents gave her their ungrudging respect.

She attracted such strong admiration and affection that virtue truly brought its own rewards. 'Your happy conscience will serve as a soft pillow at the end of your life', a Düsseldorfer told her in 1948, when she was 61; and she still had another 33 years to go.

Phoebe was an idealist and a dreamer, who applied her formidable knowledge of the system to do all that she could do to make her dreams come true. She grew more idealistic with the years, not less, and her ability to understand the underlying causes of the world's problems sometimes upset her contemporaries, locked in the sad 'realities' of Cold War politics.

A socialist and pacifist of unswerving conviction, she was capable of easy dealings with generals and businessmen, conservatives and communists when their interests were the same – which, in her case, was always the common good.

It is a tricky thing to write a biography of a person of whom no evil was ever said. I looked hard for 'corrective' evidence – failings, weaknesses, warts with which to balance out her tremendous virtue, but I could find none. Unless tremendous virtue is itself a failing. She was a teetotaler; she detested

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'rag-time, war-time, jazz and other 'orrible music(?) for 'orrible modern dances'; she would not have been an asset to a wild party. But Phoebe tolerated such traits in others, and the 'orrible modern dances' in question were held at her instigation in a youth club that she herself established.

Within her own terms of reference, Phoebe's humility and total lack of personal ambition perhaps prevented her from getting the posts – and the fame – that might have achieved still more for the causes to which she gave her life. As an MP perhaps, though few MPs manage to retain their independence and integrity for very long without themselves being consigned to the wilderness, and quite possibly Phoebe was aware of this.

She was happy to be ordinary, in her own extraordinary way, and the fire of conviction shone through her until the end of her days. 'I always felt inspired after meeting her to try to do more myself, however little', wrote one admirer. Ordinary folk can make a difference – she proved it.

Acknowledgments

Phoebe kept everything, every last plane ticket and travel brochure, membership card and notebook. After her death, Phoebe's daughter Barbara deposited her papers with relevant archives and institutions. Most of her personal papers went to the University of Reading Archives and the Berkshire County Records Office. There is useful material to be found in Reading Local Studies Library, and some also at the Museum of Reading. My thanks to the staff in all these friendly institutions. Very many thanks to Barbara Thom, Phoebe's daughter, for the loan of photographs and other vital material, and for the pleasure of an interview; likewise to Molly Casey and Verdun Perl. All three have kindly read the text and saved me from error (whatever remains wrong with this book is my fault, and not theirs).

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Sources of illustrations

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