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Flora Clift Stevenson (1839–1905): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/46826

Stevenson, Flora Clift (1839–1905), philanthropist and educationist, was born at West George Street, Glasgow, on 30 October 1839, the youngest of the numerous children of James Stevenson (1786–1866), a managing partner of the Jarrow Chemical Company, and his wife, Jane Stewart Shannan. The architect John James Stevenson was her brother. With her three unmarried sisters she spent most of her adult life at 13 Randolph Crescent, Edinburgh, where their father set up house on his retirement from business.

While her elder sister Louisa Stevenson was best-known for her work in promoting women's higher education, Flora Stevenson's main work was in the field of social reform and local government. She was educated at a private school and while still a young girl she undertook her first philanthropic work when she started a class in her home for messenger girls, drilling them in the three Rs. Her public work dated from 1868, when she joined the Edinburgh Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (which later became the Edinburgh Charity Organization Society). She was active as a district visitor for the society, investigating the circumstances of claimants for charity and distributing tickets for provisions to the deserving needy. She was also a member of the committee of the United Industrial Schools of Edinburgh, a voluntary body which organized ragged schools for neglected children. With her sisters she was among the founder members of the Edinburgh Ladies' Educational Association, and was among the first class of 265 women to enrol in David Masson's first lecture course in 1868.

In 1873 Flora Stevenson and Phoebe Blyth were elected members of the first Edinburgh school board. Created under the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, the school boards were the first public bodies in Scotland to be opened to women. She remained on the board until her death. As a result of her experience with ragged schools she was immediately placed on the destitute children's committee, where she was particularly responsible for a charitable scheme which offered food and clothing to destitute children on condition that they regularly attended school. In 1876 she became convener of the school attendance committee—her grand manner, enhanced by the careful attention she always paid to her attire, overawing 'defaulting parents' who failed to send their children to school. In this capacity she gave evidence to the select committee on education in Scotland (1887), drawing attention to the insufficient powers which existed to compel neglected children to attend school. She urged the foundation of day industrial schools for truants and juvenile delinquents. Chiefly through her efforts the Edinburgh board erected a day industrial school at St John's Hill, Edinburgh, the first school of its kind in Scotland under the management of a school board. She also helped bring about the passing of the Day Industrial Schools Act of 1893. Her expertise in these fields was recognized when she was appointed in 1894 a member of the Scottish Office departmental committee on habitual offenders and juvenile delinquents. In 1898 she was appointed a member of the committee set up to advise the Scottish Office on reformatories for inebriates.

In contemporary educational debates Flora Stevenson insisted that girls should be able to compete on equal terms with boys. Although one of the promoters of the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Economy, she criticized the practice whereby girls in board schools had five hours' a week less teaching than boys to enable them to spend time on needlework. Her enthusiasm for teaching domestic economy to girls was more qualified than some of her contemporaries, and she debated the subject with the school's founder, Christian Guthrie Wright, who believed it was 'natural' that girls should be taught to cook, knit, and sew. Arguing that boys should also be trained in household management, she commented, 'By all means let the girls of this generation be trained to be good "housemothers" but let it not be forgotten that the well being of the family depends equally on the "housefather"' (The Scotsman, 28 Sept 1876). On the school board itself she advocated equal pay for unmarried women teachers, and when she appeared before the educational endowments (Scotland) commission in 1883 she urged the opening of endowments to enable girls from board schools to compete for them. She subsequently represented the board on the Edinburgh Educational Trust and as a governor of George Heriot's Trust.

Like her sisters, Flora Stevenson was active in the women's suffrage movement. Her own politics were Liberal Unionist after the Irish home-rule split in 1886 (her eldest brother, James Cochran Stevenson, a Liberal MP, was a supporter of Irish home rule), serving as a vice-president of the Women's Liberal Unionist Association. She was also a vice-president of the Women's Free Trade Union, founded during the early-twentieth-century debates on tariff reform. She opposed state-provided welfare, attacking proposals to place a duty on school boards to provide free school meals paid for out of the rates, which she viewed as undermining the responsibilities of parents. Instead, she wanted charities to co-ordinate their efforts to support needy children by investigating family circumstances and co-operating with the school authorities. She believed that enforced attendance at school was crucial to improving the condition of deprived children in large cities.

In 1900 Flora Stevenson was unanimously elected chair of the Edinburgh school board. In the previous year the board's new school at Comely Bank was named the Flora Stevenson School in her honour. Edinburgh University awarded her the honorary degree of LLD in 1903. In May 1905 she received the freedom of Edinburgh in recognition of her services to the philanthropic and benevolent institutions of the city, as well as her work on the school board. She accepted the honour as acknowledgement 'that there is administrative work on public boards which can be, and is, fittingly and successfully carried on by hundreds of women in all parts of the kingdom' (Englishwoman's Review, 15 July 1905, 201–2). Flora Clift Stevenson died at the Marine Hotel, St Andrews, on 28 September 1905, and was buried in the Dean cemetery, Edinburgh, on 30 September. Between two and three thousand children from the public schools to which she had devoted so much of her life lined the route of her funeral.

Helen Corr

Sources

E. T. McLaren, *Recollections of the public work and home life of Louisa and Flora Stevenson* (1914) · *Englishwoman's Review*, 36 (1905), 275–8 · J. Gulland, 'A tribute', *Scottish Review and Christian Leader* (22 Oct 1905), 122 · L. Leneman, *A guid cause: the women's suffrage movement in Scotland* (1995) · minutes of the Edinburgh school board, 1873–1905, Edinburgh Central Library · T. Begg, *The excellent women: the origins and history of Queen Margaret College* (1994) · b. cert. · d. cert.

Archives

priv. coll., letters

Likenesses

A. Roche, portrait, oils, c.1904, Scot. NPG [*see illus.*]

Wealth at death

£31,524 15s. 7d.: confirmation, 27 Oct 1905, *CCI*