The Social Work History Network (SWHN) recently celebrated its tenth birthday by honouring the work of just some of the influential social reformers and social workers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A panel of speakers, who themselves have made and continue to make valuable contributions to the social work field, offered accounts of the careers and achievements of a number of ‘leading lights’, from the mid-1800s through to the early twenty-first century.

Leading lights of social work

Introducing the event and offering two of his own ‘leading light’ nominations, Dr David Jones – immediate past president of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) – highlighted the heroism of one of the earliest social work trailblazers. Jane Addams (1860-1935) was an American and a pioneer of the settlement movement as well as a champion of poor people who finally, in 1931, received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her peace campaigning.

David went on to talk about a more recent social work hero too, Irena Sendler (1910-2008) from Poland, described as IFSW’s ‘Most Distinguished Social Worker’, who saved thousands of Jewish children from the holocaust, for which she was brutally tortured. She kept records of their personal histories and placements in a glass jar, anticipating that the majority of the parents would not survive.

Closer to home, Joan Baraclough (medical social worker, Social Services Inspectorate) spoke about another social work champion dating back to the Victorian era, Mary Stewart (1862-1925), the first hospital almoner in the UK and the unlikely pioneer of a social service which has continued unbroken to the present day. As a trained social worker at the Charity Organisation Society, renamed the Family Welfare Association and now Family Action, Mary Stewart became one of their first two paid women district secretaries.

When appointed to the Royal Free Hospital in 1895 on £125 a year, a respectable salary for women of the time, her task was to show that the problems of overcrowding and abuse of medical charitable resources could be ameliorated by the employment of an almoner, as described to the House of Lords Select Committee in 1891. She identified those eligible for free hospital care, assisted those in need of additional help to make best use of medical care and tried to prevent abuse by those who could afford to pay. In this she was judged to be hugely successful. Later, with two assistant almoners and volunteers, she set about developing better ways of helping people whose lives were blighted by illness and disability. Other hospitals followed suit.

In 1903 Mary was one of seven almoners who founded the Hospital Almoners Committee, the first professional social work organisation and a direct antecedent of BASW. In light of the current issues facing social work and the much politically cited example of the modern matron, Joan wondered whether, if she were here today, Mary would say: “Bring back the almoner” and expand the service into general practice.

In 1954 Dame Eileen Younghusband (1902-1981) was internationally renowned for her research and teaching in social work. Introduced to the SWHN event by Professor Karen Lyons, London Metropolitan University and recently editor of the Journal of International Social Work, Dame Eileen had a love of learning and an incisive mind and like many of her forebears had worked in the settlement movement. Dame Eileen pioneered the first generic social work course at the London School of Economics (LSE), launched in 1954.

At home and abroad she was also a prestigious social reformer and skilled strategist, using her committee reports to further her objectives. The two-year non-graduate social work course, a recommendation of the Younghusband Report (1959), was very popular. This was an attempt to improve the quality of the workforce and its management which Dame Eileen knew was urgently required. Despite her success in promoting social work education, Karen Lyons used her presentation to reflect on the legacy of these courses. Had they perhaps inadvertently perpetuated a non-graduate culture in the profession?

Bill Pearce and Joan Cooper were two further luminaries from more recent times to receive acclaim, when Sir William Utting – former chief inspector of social services and former chair of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – highlighted their respective contributions to social work. He described Bill Pearce (1920-1982) as “an ideal boss”, before reflecting on Bill’s work as a
probation officer and prison reformer. Sir William highlighted Bill's experiences in the Merchant Navy and subsequently as a Japanese prisoner of war as laying the foundations for his post-war career in the criminal justice service (CJS) when probation was still part of social work. His flair for management first emerged during his time at Durham Combined Area Probation Service where he adopted a whole systems approach, bringing together a range of stakeholder organisations to further improvements in the CJS.

In contrast to Bill Pearce’s working class background, Joan Cooper (1914-1999) was middle class. Her background was in education – where children services were then located – and administration. She became children’s officer for East Sussex in 1948 following the introduction of the Children Act. Like Bill, she was deservedly respected by her staff, not least for her effectiveness in reforming obsolete systems. She was also an innovator of children's services, promoting the introduction of foster homes and small children's homes.

In 1965 Joan was appointed chief inspector of the Children’s Department at the Home Office and, following the department’s transfer, director of the Social Work Service at the Department of Health and Social Security. She steered organisational changes at national as well as local levels and her intellectual ability enabled her to reduce complex matters to incisive summaries for ministerial guidance. In ‘retirement’ she continued to further her objectives, entering academia as a visiting researcher. She was also chair of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and advocated for the three systems approach, bringing together a range of stakeholder organisations to further improvements in the CJS.

Professor June Thoburn of the University of East Anglia added the name of Clare Britton Winnicott (1907-1984) to the list of great historical social work and social care leaders, telling the audience about her experience of being taught by Clare whilst on the Barnett House Child Care Officer course. These lectures on early child development were described as “an unforgettable experience”. Reflecting on her subject’s career, Professor Thoburn recounted how during the Second World War Clare Britton worked with evacuees who had “failed in their billets”. Clare later married the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, forming a complimentary partnership as Donald provided the conceptual framework and Clare the “creative response”.

Emerging profession
She gave evidence to the Curtis Committee (1946), the work of which preceded the Children Act 1948. Clare described social work as an emerging profession which entailed work for and with the child. June Thoburn quoted from a recent lecture by Professor Olive Stevenson, who knew Clare well, to reflect on how she would view today’s practice. She felt Clare would bemoan the current practice of social workers leaving it to others to transport children to contact visits and in turn miss the opportunity to spend time with them on car journeys where they would feel more relaxed and able to open up.

Whilst analytically-orientated and insistent on the importance of being with and listening to children, Clare also wrote about the importance of advocating for the child and about child sensitive agency contexts. To her the professional relationship was the basic technique. Social work involved striving to make a personal relationship, understanding the child’s world and “helping ‘him’ make the most of it”. Clare was the founding director of one of the first three child care officer courses in 1947 – at the London School of Economics where she worked alongside Kay McDougall and Dame Eileen Younghusband.

Lady Juliet Bingley (1925-2005) was the Carr Gomm Society (housing association) patients’ rights and mental health reform. Lady Bingley was also a founder member of the National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease, duties she carried out alongside her day job as head of medical social work at St Mark’s Hospital, London.

Even in her retirement, she continued to provide one-to-one counselling for people with severe health problems.