

# These Dangerous Women: a talk by Helen Kay at the National Library of Scotland



Chrystal MacMillan

Although feminism still has many fights to fight, women in today's Scotland can at least vote, keep their own nationality on marriage and enter any profession they choose. In 1914, women had few of these rights and the UK was at war with Germany. We have an Edinburgh-born woman, Chrystal Macmillan, and her equally intrepid colleagues to thank for both our personal and our political freedom – yet their stories have been erased from history. Now new research – and a new film – are aiming to give these pioneering women the recognition they deserve.



Helen Kay- image DRB  
Scottish Women's History  
Group

Helen Kay is investigating the role of Scottish women in the peace movement; at the National Library of Scotland recently, Helen gave a fascinating and inspiring talk about the 'dangerous women' who campaigned tirelessly for peace and equality.



Corstorphine Hill House –  
image: [www.geograph.org.uk](http://www.geograph.org.uk)

Chrystal Macmillan's early years were spent at Corstorphine

Hill House; her father was a partner in Melrose Tea and she and her eight brothers lived a comfortable middle-class life. In 1888 Chrystal joined St Leonard's School (then very much a girls-only establishment) in St Andrew's; she was well educated and won a scholarship to Oxford, but her parents wished her to return to Edinburgh. Enrolling at Edinburgh University to study Maths and Philosophy, she became a member of the Women's Representation Committee, graduated with a First (and was also the first woman to graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree), took an MA in Philosophy and became active in the women's suffrage movement all over Scotland, often working with Elsie Inglis and Eunice Murray.

In the early twentieth century the university had its own parliamentary seat, the MP being elected by its General Council. The Council's statutes entitled graduates to vote, but had been written when only men could graduate; the Council argued that the statutes' references to 'people' did not include 'women'. Chrystal took the women's case to the University Courts (who rejected her argument) and then to the House of Lords. Again she lost. She was undeterred.



Mary Sheepshanks –  
image  
[www.swarthmore.edu](http://www.swarthmore.edu)

By 1913 Chrystal was the only family member still resident at Corstorphine House; she sold the estate and moved to London. (The property eventually became Edinburgh Zoo). Chrystal was totally committed to the women's suffrage movement and became involved in a project to document women's voting rights around the world; in 1913 *Woman Suffrage in Practice* was published. When war was declared in 1914, Chrystal sought pacifism – but she was far from inactive; by October of that year she was running a relief office for destitute women in London, and when asked by the Netherlands to help refugees in Flushing,

she and Mary Sheepshanks delivered the assistance in person; they believed in providing what was actually needed, not what the Military Relief Committees thought *should* be required.



In 1914, as a delegate of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, Chrystal was due to attend the International Women's Suffrage Alliance conference in Berlin; it was cancelled. When hostilities broke out women had no voice; they were excluded from decision-making just as they were excluded from most professions. The suffrage movement became divided, with many of the more vocal members turning instead to the 'war effort' and even taking part in the notorious White Feather movement.



American women's suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt proposed holding an international women's peace conference in The Hague, but the NUWSS refused to send delegates – for many nationalism was now more important than suffrage. Chrystal and some of the other women (many of whom had resigned from the NUWSS in protest) decided to go alone, their guiding principles being that anyone who came with them must (1) agree with women's suffrage and (2) acknowledge that all international disputes should be resolved by conciliatory means.



#### International Women's Peace Conference 1915

The British government refused to issue passports to all but a few 'sensible women' ; the newspapers called them 'these feminine busybodies' – but still they went (a total of almost 1200 women from 12 countries eventually attended, despite the North Sea shipping lanes being closed). Many resolutions were

passed by this politically powerless assembly, until one of the delegates asked '*Words, words, words – when are we going to take some action?*' So they did. Envoys were chosen to lobby governments across Europe, with the women undertaking journeys that would have been unthinkable for most even in peacetime – they met prime ministers, presidents, kings and even the Pope. Chrystal's remit was the Northern European capitals; she could not travel through Germany, so went by boat to Copenhagen and took a train right round the top of Finland to Petrograd (now St Petersburg), then the imperial capital of Russia. Most of their hosts received them well and encouraged them to continue with their work, but not one statesman would take the first step towards mediation. In 1915 the delegates gathered in New York (the US being at that time neutral) to present the Wisconsin Plan (a pamphlet *Continuous Mediation Without Armistice* having been published by Professor Julia Grace Wales at Wisconsin-Madison University the year before) to President Woodrow Wilson.



Julia Grace Wales

After the war Chrystal became a London barrister and continued her campaigning work for many causes including equal pay, equal opportunities in the workplace, and particularly in the area of married women's nationality. She did not live to see the fruits of her efforts, dying in 1937, twenty years before the United Nations finally established independent nationality for every married person. She was always a non-militant suffragette, but unlike the more radical members of the movement she continued the struggle right through the war.



The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom grew from the Hague conference. Its first international president was Jane Addams, who was subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize. It has been campaigning ever since, and is celebrating its 100th birthday this year; it is currently involved in bringing civilians to the peace talks in Syria and has brought Syrian and Bosnian women together to share their experiences. The League believes that *'peace is not rooted only in treaties between great powers or a turning away of weapons alone, but can only flourish when it is planted in the soil of justice, freedom, non-violence, opportunity and equality for all'*. The Scottish Branch of WILPF is very active; Helen Kay is one of its members. You can find out more about it via its Facebook page [here](#).



The Clapham Film Unit and WILPF have received Heritage Lottery Funding to make a film about the women who attended the Hague conference and their journeys. The director, Charlotte Bill, was at Helen's talk to announce that *These Dangerous Women* will be premiered in London on 25th March and shown at the Augustine United Church here in Edinburgh on 18th May 2015. Helen Kay is continuing her research in various archives, and has received great support (and some wonderful photographs) from Chrystal Macmillan's family.



As Helen says, it took great courage to argue for peace when everyone else was swept up in patriotism and dissenters were mocked, villified and often kept under police surveillance. Chrystal wanted *'a peace that is not just a negation of war, a peace that is living and growing and active'*. So when you exercise your right to vote in May, or when you next pass the University of Edinburgh's Chrystal Macmillan Building in George Square, spare a thought for this brave and remarkable Scottish woman.



Image: National Library of

Scotland

Thanks to Helen Kay for an excellent talk!