

# Remembering Elsie Inglis at Westminster

Later today a service will take place at St Giles to commemorate the 100 years since the death of Dr Elsie Inglis who, among her other achievements, set up the Scottish Women's Hospitals.



The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and The Princess Royal are expected to attend the service later today which will be timed at exactly 100 years to the minute since Dr Inglis' funeral was held there in 1917.

In Parliament yesterday Ian Murray MP and Deidre Brock MP took the opportunity of talking about her and her achievements.

Mr Murray introduced the Westminster Hall debate by saying : "I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocated time for this important debate in this important week for remembering Dr Elsie Inglis.

"She was a truly historic and remarkable woman—an Edinburgh woman, no less, and very proud of her roots. This week is the centenary of her death and of the state funeral that she was afforded, which will be re-enacted tomorrow.

"Who was Dr Elsie Inglis? Born in India in 1864, she was the daughter of John Inglis, a chief commissioner in the Indian civil service. She studied medicine at Dr Sophia Jex-Blake's then newly opened Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women and was one of the first women in Scotland to finish higher education, although she was not allowed to graduate. She went

on to complete her training under Sir William Macewen at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary.

“The now famous exhortation, “My good lady, go home and sit still”, was the response that Dr Elsie Inglis received when she asked the War Office whether female doctors and surgeons could serve in frontline hospitals in world war one. At that time and for many years to come, that was the attitude that women faced in making vital contributions to society.”

✘ Ms Brock said :

*“I am particularly pleased to speak today not only as a woman and an Edinburgh MP, but as someone who has long held an interest in the work of Dr Elsie Maud Inglis, one of Edinburgh’s finest adopted daughters.*

*“Elsie pursued women’s equality not just through words, but through work. She campaigned for the vote and she took part in the war, even when she was rudely told not to. Elsie did not “know her place”—she wanted to make a better world for all women. Many folk in her home city of Edinburgh, where she lived, trained and worked for much of her life, still do not know who Dr Elsie Inglis really was, beyond the name of the old maternity hospital where so many Edinburghers, including my partner, were born.*

*“As we have heard, awareness of Elsie Inglis’s work is growing, with a local campaign in the Edinburgh Evening News gathering steam and a long-standing and relentless campaign for greater recognition led by Alan Cumming and Ian McFarlane. There are a few plaques here and there that commemorate the tremendous work of the Scottish women’s hospitals, but notably there are many more in Serbia, as we have heard. All credit to Clydesdale bank for putting Elsie’s image on its £50 notes in 2009. However, it is hardly the heights that Winston Churchill predicted when he said:*

*“The record of their work, lit up by the fame of Dr Inglis, will shine in history.”*

*“I am not going to go over all Elsie Inglis’s achievements—those have been ably covered by other Members—but suffice to say that hers is an incredible story. The grit and passion this woman and her colleagues showed in standing up to the prevailing attitudes to women and driving their plans forward regardless remain an inspiration to us all. The challenges for women at that time make her story all the more astonishing. Elsie Inglis was not a nurturing angel in the role women were expected to adopt; we remember her for her surgeon’s skills, her leadership, her tenacity and her vision, and for the impact she made on so many lives and the principles by which she lived. Elsie may have had a relatively privileged background, but she chose to take on the screaming wealth and gender inequalities of society. She was a progressive before that term became fashionable.*

*“As convener of culture in Edinburgh, I supported another 100th anniversary back in 2009, when there was the recreation of the 1909 Gude Cause suffrage procession along Princes Street, which I believe Elsie played a part in organising. That was such a memorable day, when we sisters and a few brothers celebrated not just the efforts of those women in gaining the vote, but the changes we have seen in the 100 years since. The accompanying “Votes for Women” exhibition at the Museum of Edinburgh—it was curated by another woman passionate about the history of the suffrage movement in Scotland, the excellent and late Helen Clark—was hugely successful and was extended by popular demand month after month.*

*“Finally, the role Elsie Inglis and her contemporaries played in carving a path for me and other women to get involved in politics and medicine and to help build a better society for our daughters and our sons began to be more widely recognised in Edinburgh.*

*“Elsie deserves a statue in Edinburgh, at least as much as the grand generals on horses, the visiting royals clad in tartan trews or that famous terrier in the graveyard. I hope we get one, and soon.*

*“If as many Edinburgh girls and women as could manage it gave just £1 each towards that project, we would reach the target very soon. That would be a lovely tribute from those of us who owe many of the freedoms we enjoy today to women like Elsie. However, it is even more important that her legacy is a living one, where we work to protect our NHS from privatisation, tackle poverty and inequality, and ensure that every child has the best possible start in life. I am sure Elsie would approve of the Scottish Government’s baby box policy. One of my favourite slogans from the 1909 march, which was recreated in song for the anniversary, is:*

*“Ye maunna tramp on the Scottish thistle”.*

*“That mood still resonates now, and the UK Government would do well to mind it.*

*“It is good to see at least one woman being celebrated in this Parliament, which has so often failed many, many women. I could refer to the unfairness dished out to the Women Against State Pension Inequality pensioners, or how universal credit disproportionately targets women. There is the horrifying rape clause, the continuing disparity in wages between men and women, and many more examples.*

*“Elsie Inglis was an utterly remarkable woman who did an enormous amount of good, but she was fortunate to have started from a position of some privilege. We should be levelling the playing field and giving every woman a chance—at least a chance—of a life lived to its full potential. I am certain she would agree with that. Her great-nephew, the Reverend Hugh Inglis Maddox, said recently:*

*“My great-aunt spent her life showing men that women could do*

anything.”

“Let that be her legacy.

“I welcome the commemorations for the 100th anniversary of Elsie Inglis’s death. At the weekend, I—alongside our Health Minister, Elsie’s descendants and Edinburgh’s Lord Provost—attended a beautiful memorial service in Dean cemetery, where Elsie lies. It is good to see Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon paying hearty tribute to this hero. I believe she is attending the ceremony in St Giles cathedral tomorrow.

“Here in London, the many roles of women in world war one are marked in a lovely, moving memorial at the Cenotaph, but among all the unsung heroes, Elsie’s is a name that deserves to be sung about—a story that deserves to be told.”