

Castle of Light illuminates Edinburgh women that history forgot

It is a commonly held belief that there are more statues of animals in Edinburgh than of named women. The jury is out on that and it may well change in time, but looking back at the history of the city there are some notable women.

As the city celebrates the 900 years since it became a royal burgh, a consortium of Scottish digital and visual talent are working hard to shine a light on the lesser-known stories of some of these trailblazing women.

[Castle of Light](#), a collaboration with Historic Environment Scotland, is at the heart of Edinburgh's Christmas festivities for a fifth fantastic year, and this time promises to tell the stories of Edinburgh's tenacious women with all-new storytelling projections.

The light show spans the 12th to 21st century, and includes the stories of eight inspiring women, with connections to Edinburgh, that you can expect to meet throughout Edinburgh Castle's after-dark walking trail.

Marie Maitland

Marie Maitland is the brave writer behind some of the first

lesbian poetry on record. Her works appear anonymously among a manuscript of other poems she compiled, telling us – in Scots language – about her life and love as a lesbian woman in the 1500s.

She continues to inspire queer poets today, and her poetry has recently formed part of the world-first launch of [LGBT inclusive education in Scotland](#) in 2021.

Mary Sommerville

Scottish science pioneer Mary Sommerville was born back in 1780, and you may recognise her from the Royal Bank of Scotland £10 note. She predicted the existence of the planet Neptune, and her work formed the backbone of the first science curriculum at Cambridge.

A true force to be reckoned with, as a kid she refused to eat sugar to protest slavery and was the first person to sign John Stuart Mills' unsuccessful petition for votes for women.

Queen Margaret

Fondly referred to as the 'Pearl of Scotland', Queen Margaret arrived in Scotland by accident, but went on to fund a ferry service for pilgrims across the Firth of Forth, giving North and South Queensferry their names. Deeply religious, she carried out many charitable acts and, after passing away in Edinburgh Castle, she was canonised as a saint.

Edinburgh's oldest building, St Margaret's Chapel, which sits within the walls of Edinburgh Castle, is named after her and now happens to be looked after by a group of women – all named Margaret!

Isabella Bird

An explorer, naturalist and photographer, Isabella Bird wrote eighteen books about her adventures in the 1800s, the most famous being 'A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains'.

Brilliantly outspoken, she co-founded a hospital in modern-day Kashmir and was the first woman elected as a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

She died in her Melville Street home in her 70s, with a suitcase packed ready for her next roundtrip.

Sophia Jex-Blake

Sophia Jex-Blake was one of the 'Edinburgh Seven' – a collective of the first women ever enrolled at a British university, studying medicine at Edinburgh in 1869. Male students rioted when the group sat their medical exams, and Sophia's degree from Edinburgh wasn't officially awarded until 150 years later.

But that didn't stop Dr Jex-Blake from founding a small hospital offering low-cost care to poor women and children, and later establishing the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women.

Nannie Brown

There was no shortage of suffragists and suffragettes in Scotland. Nannie Brown, born at 125 Princes Street to a father who was himself sympathetic to suffrage, was a mighty figure within the movement, organising a historic march from Edinburgh to London in 1912.

Beyond this, Brown was an active participant in and promoter of amateur dramatics in Edinburgh, writing several stories, lectures and plays.

Elizabeth Wiskemann

Elizabeth Winkelmann spent World War 2 working in the media, while secretly gathering intelligence. When Britain learned that Hungarian Jewish people were being deported to concentration camps, she insisted that the allies bomb the railway, but they refused.

So, she sent an unencrypted telegram containing the addresses of Hungarian officials, leading to house raids that put a sudden stop to the deportations.

Dr Kesaveloo Goonam

Kesavaloo was a South African doctor and anti-apartheid activist who graduated from Edinburgh in 1936. Ten years later, in South Africa, she became one of the founders of the Passive Resistance Campaign against racism, having faced discrimination denying her entry to hospital jobs.

She also stood up for the rights of women and will forever be remembered as 'the first Black woman doctor and freedom fighter'.

Castle of Light is taking place at Edinburgh Castle until Saturday 4 January 2025, packed with immersive installations to guide you through Edinburgh's colourful history.

Ticketed entry slots will run every 15 minutes between 4.30pm and 7.30pm each evening, with last entry between 7.30pm and 7.45pm. The event closes at 9pm. Concession rates, family tickets and discounts for Historic Scotland members are also available.

For more information and to get your tickets, visit www.CastleofLight.scot. Advance booking is required.



