

Isabella Ford and WIL during WWI

Talk given to UK WILPF in 2014 by Professor June Hannam, University of the West Of England, specialist in women's social and political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Introduction

My aim is to look at some of the issues that were relevant for the women peace campaigners from 1914 to the early 1920s - and it could be argued are still pertinent today- through the activities and ideas of one of its key propagandists, Isabella Ford. I would like to suggest that exploring the women's peace movement through the lens of one of its participants enables us to explore the complexities that were involved in any engagement with peace politics. It highlights what was specific about the period under consideration, but also adds to an understanding of questions that remain important.

Areas/Issues to be considered:

1. What motivated women to become involved in the campaign for peace and why did they think that it was important to act together as women?
2. What were the emotional dimensions of the campaign?
3. What were the best tactics/ methods to use?
4. How did peace campaigning interact with or indeed conflict with party political loyalties?
5. What was the relationship between the local and the national?

Isabella Ford was born into a wealthy Quaker family in Leeds. Like many of the leadership of the movement she was a well- educated, middle class woman who had been involved, as a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), in the pre-war fight for the suffrage. She was fluent in French and German and had been at home in the international suffrage conferences organised by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) where she had made many friends. At the same time she had, since the early 1890s, been a committed socialist, joining the Independent Labour Party (ILP) when it was formed in 1893 and engaging in socialist propaganda in the West Riding of Yorkshire and nationally. Between 1903 and 1907 she was a member of the National Administrative Council of the ILP. From the 1880s to 1900 she had been involved in a direct way with organising women workers into trade unions and assisting in strike actions. From 1907 to the outbreak of war, however, she gave most of her energies to the women's suffrage campaign as a member of the EC of the NUWSS.

Although women could work together for peace during the war years themselves there were tensions arising from party loyalties, which could also affect ideas about how best to campaign and to organise, which were to surface more acutely after the war itself. Isabella Ford was in an interesting position here- she was committed to the struggle for peace as well as always retaining her socialist perspective. On the other hand by this period she was not an office holder either in the ILP or the Labour Party so she could tread an independent path that

was not always available to others. Finally, she retained her campaigning roots in the West Riding and therefore played a significant role locally as well as nationally, always seeking to emphasise the importance of the grass roots membership in the provinces.

Background

The Women's International League (WIL) was formed after the Women's Peace Meeting at The Hague in 1915. Isabella Ford herself was one of the delegates who had visas to go to the peace conference when shipping was cancelled in the North Sea and they were unable to go. It is important to emphasise just how much the WIL grew out of the pre-war suffrage movement in terms of both ideas and personnel- leaders such as Helena Swanwick, Kathleen Courtney, Isabella Ford and Catharine Marshall had spearheaded the NUWSS policy of closer links with the Labour Party and had seen women's suffrage as part of a broader move towards democracy. They had resigned from the NUWSS executive committee because of its stand on the war. When the WIL was formed Helena Swanwick was the chair; Maude Royden, Margaret Ashton and Kate Courtney were vice chairmen while Isabella Ford and Catherine Marshall were on the executive committee. At the same time some leading ILP members and Labour Party supporters, who had not been associated so closely with the campaign for a limited suffrage also came with enthusiasm into the WIL, including Margaret Bondfield and Katharine Bruce Glasier.

Emotions

Social scientists have made us far more aware in recent years of the extent to which politics is not just a rational activity but is shot through with passion and emotion. Emotions can motivate individuals to become involved in social movements, provide solidarities with others and help to sustain activists in difficult times. Peace politics operated in this way at several levels. It brought out depths of feeling in Isabella, for example, that she rarely displayed on public platforms. In an obituary it was recalled that Isabella, usually so broadminded and full of humour, at the 1914 NUWSS conference held to debate what the organisation should do at this time of war, 'declaimed against cooperation with the government for war purposes with a pugnacity of word and gesture which took everyone's breath away, and then, having had her say, stamped off the platform and down the hall in almost ferocious style'. (Turner, 1924) Although at the beginning she did take part in relief schemes for women thrown out of work by war Isabella Ford increasingly felt that she had to do something that was directed to seeking a negotiated peace. In a letter to Catharine Marshall, 25 October 1914, she expressed her frustration: she was 'horribly tied up with C.Council work and Lord Mayor's Committee, because for the sake of Woman with a big W & all that, I had to do it. Now I am trying to find tactful ways of shirking it for my whole mind and soul is bent on peace work'.

While later peace activism in a hostile climate was sustained by close friendships it could also put a strain on other, long standing friendships which was extremely painful. This was the case with her friendship with Millicent Fawcett, leader of the NUWSS. At the beginning Isabella still hoped that the NUWSS could be persuaded to take a more critical stand on the

war and attempted to be conciliatory with her old friend Millicent Fawcett. Before a meeting on women's work in time of war to be held at the Kingsway Hall, October 1914, she wrote to Millicent Fawcett that she would say nothing of a 'disloyal nature'...say all that you think- all you write to me, about Germany, I shan't look tiresome...I shd so hate to think my presence made you say anything but what you *wish* to say...I know you will understand, If I ever feel I must take some other line than that what you approve...I only wish I could feel as you do'. (Letter to Millicent Fawcett, Autumn 1914) Hoping that that they would be able to work together she urged Catharine Marshall not to resign yet from the executive since, although Mrs Fawcett was a stumbling block, 'she is not so bad quite as I expected for she and Agnes were most unspeakable during the Boer War'. (Letter to Catharine Marshall, 25 October 1915). Once Isabella threw herself into peace work Millicent Fawcett stopped writing for a while and it was only later that they reconciled, exchanging gifts at Christmas 1916.

Women could experience physical pain through finding that women they had worked with internationally- whether in the socialist or the suffrage movement- were now to be seen as enemies. In January 1915, those women from the NUWSS committed to peace activism (including Swanwick, Ford, Bondfield, Royden) wrote an open letter to women in Germany and Austria: 'Do not let us forget our very anguish unites us, that we are passing together through the same experiences of pain and grief. We pray you to believe that come what may we hold to our faith in peace and goodwill between nations.' (Francis Johnson Collection, ILP papers, LSE) Adelheid Popp, leader of the socialist women of Austria, wrote to Isabella remembering the time they visited a home for children in Budapest in 1913: 'At that time when the same efforts and the same ideas brought us together we, indeed, never thought that so soon we should become enemies...we are united with you in the desire for peace and the brotherhood of nations'. (*Labour Leader* 26 August 1915)

Empathy with the everyday suffering of women in other countries- and the belief that relief work rather than punitive sanctions could aid international understanding and reconciliation after the war (Vellacott, 181-4) – was something that gave women a distinctive perspective on peace. For example, at the first post war international meeting of WILPF held in 1919 in Zurich Isabella was able get first hand understanding of the suffering of many women, especially in countries affected by the blockade. Women were so moved by what they saw that it could only reinforce their commitment to peace. Isabella's friend Ethel Snowden recalled that: 'Tender hearted Isabella Ford flitted from one woman to another, busying herself in particular with the frail and underfed women from the ex-enemy lands, saying here and there the comforting helpful word to lonely souls inclined to half bitterness...Isabella came to me the second morning with her eyes full of tears. 'Dear Isabella, what is the matter?' I enquired. She showed me a telegram just received by her German neighbour announcing the death of her only daughter. 'She is heartbroken', said my friend. 'She was an only child. And it was through hunger that the decline set in. She cannot speak to us this morning. And I do not wonder'. (Snowden, *A Political Pilgrim in Europe*, 1921, 82)

Ideas

The desire for a *women's* peace movement (even though there were other groups such as the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) that shared their aims) arose partly from the fact that women had worked together across national boundaries in the suffrage movement and already had these links. Single sex organisations were common both inside and outside mixed sex movements in the period before WW1 and reflected the different social and political position of men and women. As with the pre-war suffrage movement Isabella made reference to 'inspiring women'- for instance she argued that they must teach women and children 'Nurse Cavell's words- Patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred for anyone.' This is an interesting example since Nurse Cavell was also claimed as a patriotic heroine from those who supported the war!

A key issue here was that women did not have the vote and therefore, in Isabella's words, 'they had no share in making the war'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 2 Nov 1917) They were also unable to fight. This led Isabella to argue, when speaking on how socialist women stood up for peace more than men, that 'it is in a sense easier for women to make such a protest than it may be for men on the grounds that combatants can hardly raise a demand for peace without the other nations regarding it as a sign of weakness' (*Leeds Weekly Citizen* 12 March 1915) Moreover, women could not be accused of cowardice.

Isabella reflected arguments that were common in the women's peace movement when she emphasised that women's role as mothers, and the loss that they suffered when male relatives were killed, made them more likely to desire peace than men: |: 'Women have more to lose in this horrible business than some men have, for they often lose more than life itself when their men are killed, since they lose all that makes life worth living for, all that makes for happiness...the destruction of the race too is felt more bitterly and more deeply by those who through suffering and anguish have brought the race into the world'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 12 March 1915)

It was because of this that it was so important for women to have the vote: Reporting on the meeting at the Hague, after speaking to delegates, Isabella wrote that 'the conference has proved that international understanding is possible for the future...when the women of all nations have a voice in the affairs of their various governments...this understanding will grow more and more rapidly...as the mothers and educators of the human race the bond that unites us is deeper than the bond which at present unites men.' (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 28 May 1915) When Millicent Fawcett thought women had a duty to carry out supportive relief work, and others in the NUWSS thought the war had nothing to do with suffrage, Isabella retorted that, on the contrary, it had everything to do with it. She argued that peace 'propaganda would strengthen our W S cause immensely and would clearly explain to the public that our whole *raison d'être* is the substitution of **moral and spiritual** force for physical force...' (Council Address on Attitudes to the War, 1915). Only when women had a say in foreign policy could they use their influence for peace since 'the combination of both men's and women's wisdom was necessary in the governance of the world'. She was one of those retiring members who signed a statement that 'the real cleavage of opinion in the Union

lies between those who consider it essential to work for the vote simply as a political tool, and those who believe that the demand for the vote should be linked with the advocacy of the deeper principles that underlie it'. (Statement by retiring members, *Common Cause*, 14 June 1915)

She was especially concerned to emphasise that change had to come for both people, and nations, from within and could not just be externally imposed. She countered the views of the Labour Party MP James O'Grady who called for Britain to crush Prussianism by saying that she wished he would explain how he 'means to do that...in the old days, when it was preached that those who made a nation great were its thinkers rather than its fighters, we used to preach that salvation, therefore, comes from within and not from without'. In an argument that has some resonance today she suggested that the section of the German population that wanted to give up Belgium and France should be encouraged not hindered:

'But each time our speakers and writers urge the continuation of war in order to crush Prussian militarism, that party in Germany receives a slight setback. Would it not be a wiser policy to help that party to grow strong, by preaching the common sense of internationalism and leaving the crushing of Prussianism to the nation who lives under it'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 2 June 1916)

Alongside these suffragist/feminist views Isabella also brought a socialist perspective. She agreed with the ILP line that the war was not just brought about by secret diplomacy but also by commercial rivalries of capitalist economies and she looked to socialists throughout Europe to lead the movement for peace- she sent a May Day message, along with other women socialist propagandists, to comrades abroad and felt they had kept alive the 'spirit of internationalism'. The slogan 'my country right or wrong' was a false patriotism, the creed only of 'the commercial and ruling classes' so women had to become international in their work for socialism and for women's rights. (*Labour Leader*, 29 April 1915) She reiterated this after the war at a May Day Labour demonstration in Leeds: 'the international was the only manner in which Labour would ever succeed, for the exploiter was busy in all lands and was busy in Germany on account of the low rate of currency there, the only power to stop the exploitation was the united power of labour...they must be international...and demand disarmament instead of militarism which was the curse of all nations. The only means of supplanting militarism was by the spirit of international understanding...she stood for complete disarmament for all nations as the only security against war'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 7 May 1920)

She managed to combine this socialist analysis with her work for the WIL because she tended to emphasise different things for her different audiences and also because she was not a specific office holder in either movement. Perhaps also it was due to her standing in both the women's movement and the ILP.

Activities (and humour)

What methods of peace campaigning were used? Since the WIL (and many other peace groups) did not set out to disrupt the war effort but rather to urge a negotiated peace and the

establishment of mechanisms to ensure there would not be future wars then education of the public was seen as vital whether through leaflets, books or speeches. As Isabella explained ‘we all feel that constructive educational work is needed so that women may think and vote intelligently on international affairs and by so doing may help the men of the nation to have a wider and more intelligent and humane outlook than they have had in the past...to abolish war is our aim’ (*Leeds Weekly Citizen* 2 November 1917)

Isabella expressed her views in articles and letters to the press and was also one of the key speakers for the WIL. She spoke in London and at other venues in the provinces, although the bulk of her propaganda work at a local level was in Leeds and the West Riding where she had helped to establish a local branch of the WIL. She also spoke on behalf of other organisations including the UDC, the Society of Friends and the ILP – for all of them she talked about women and internationalism/ peace and also against conscription. At the same time she continued to address local NUWSS branches on the significance of women’s suffrage and despite having resigned from the executive committee was still president of the West Riding Federation of the NUWSS. Finally, she also spoke on labour topics, in particular the needs of women workers and was usually on one of the platforms of the large May Day rallies in Leeds throughout the war. She was an inspiring and witty speaker and writer- in one of her letters to the press she said ‘You will remember Mr editor that Abraham Lincoln, when asked to shoot deserters, refused, saying he “had never noticed that killing a man reformed him”. I suppose now Mr O’Grady wishes us to understand that that reply does not apply to Germans and that, on the contrary, it does reform them’. (LWC, 2 June 1916)

Isabella’s speaking schedule was a punishing one that involved a great deal of travelling and speaking indoors and out in all weathers. The work must have been exhausting. Helena Swanwick gives an indication of this in her reminiscences: ‘travelling in war time was an arduous affair. Trains were erratic, sometimes shunted to allow the passage of troop trains, so that one missed one’s connection and had hours to wait, carriages packed with soldiers, often lying all along the corridors’. (Swanwick, 1935, 293). The WIL, dominated by middle-class, well-educated women, could be seen as cautious and moderate in its campaigning, often avoiding the use of the term peace and being careful to praise the bravery of the men who were fighting. Nonetheless, any kind of peace work was difficult and dangerous. Activists were accused of being in the pay of the Kaiser and it took courage to be involved. Isabella often met with hostile crowds and was pelted with rotten fruit and stones, although she claimed that she had become used to this during suffrage campaigning. On one occasion, for example, she was to have been one of the speakers at an anti -conscription meeting organised by the UDC in London but the venue was ‘stormed by Canadian soldiers and medical students’ and the speakers had to be smuggled out. ‘When the speakers appeared there were scenes of uproar’ and they had to escape. (*Derby Daily Telegraph* , 30 Nov 1915) The three meetings scheduled to take place in the memorial hall were then cancelled and the WIL organised one instead at the Portman Rooms on 23 December to make the women’s case against conscription. By 1916 peace activists were often seen as on the edge of the law. Meetings were watched by police spies- on a speaking tour of South Wales, for example, the socialist and suffragist Ethel Snowden claimed that every word of her speech was sent by the

Glamorgan chief constable to the Home Office, although it was agreed that prosecution would do more harm than good.

Women's Peace Crusade

Although many socialist and labour women were involved in the WIL they often became frustrated with the methods used. They suggested that the WIL should have been setting out to develop a more mass based campaign and to reach out to *working-class* women. It was often at a local level that the WIL could attempt to get a broader base and that explains why Isabella was active in establishing, and then working within, the Leeds branch of the WIL. At the start it had approx. 75 members, rising to 203 1917-18 and then 180 in 1919 (the figures for other cities were, for example, Manchester 750; Glasgow 408; Birmingham 120; Bristol 89). By 1916-17 the atmosphere in the country, and the context of the war itself was changing. Losses at the Somme, food shortages and discontent amongst skilled workers led by the rank and file shop stewards' movement increased war weariness and discontent. There was a greater impetus to bring the war to a close through negotiation- there had been the first Russian Revolution; the LP had left the war time coalition, putting forward plans for an independent peace settlement and Woodrow Wilson had drawn up his own peace proposals.

In this context there was an attempt to broaden the women's peace movement by drawing more working-class women into campaigning for peace through the use of mass demonstrations. (Liddington, 1983). The idea for this came initially from the Glasgow ILP member Helen Crawford who suggested a Women's Peace Crusade earlier in the war. This took off in 1917 when demonstrations were organised in key urban centres. The aim was to bring together the interests of women and workers in calling for a negotiated peace and the democratic control of foreign policy and tapped into women's concerns with their jobs, homes and families. An initial WPC demonstration in Glasgow in July 1917 attracted 10,000 people and was followed later in the summer by demonstrations in Manchester, Leicester, Nelson and other towns. The WPC was not necessarily linked to any specific organisation- in Manchester and Bristol, for instance, the ILP took the initiative, but in Leeds Isabella organised it through the WIL. In Leeds women from 11 different organisations took part and throughout August and September they went from house to house distributing literature and then took part in demonstrations. These were held throughout the country and culminated in a public meeting at the Central hall in Westminster at which Isabella spoke.

The question about how best to conduct peace campaigning and whether WIL should be the focus was even more significant once the immediate crisis of the war was over. For many ILP women the war brought them even closer to male comrades in the ILP. In 1915, for instance, Isabella had sent a new year's greeting to the ILP expressing her pride in the stand it had taken on the war. 'I have always been thankful that I had the good sense to be a socialist, and now am more so than ever...in the midst of all this chaos and ruin, of all the nonsense talked about this war ending all war, the ILP and its leaders, Mr Keir Hardie, JR MacDonald, Bruce Glasier and the rest have stood calmly upholding those principles of sense and justice which alone can save us and all humanity. How proud it makes me to remember

that for four years I had the honour to be their colleague on the NAC'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, 15 January 1915)

Once some women had gained the vote in 1918 Isabella hoped that this would mean a greater chance of ensuring peace and other social changes. Writing to Alf Mattison, an old ILP comrade from Leeds, she spoke of her 'rejoicing'. 'And now the great tasks that lie before us, peace, reform and all the rest, will be so much easier to work at. We shall have a weapon in our hands & hitherto we have had none...I find everywhere now- and my peace work is taking me all over the country-that women are awakening wonderfully to their new position'. She did, however, strike a note of caution –'but oh! Will they save us? Will they?' (1st Feb 1918). For many peace campaigners who were active in the labour and socialist movement it was the Labour Party that offered the best hope of building a new world after the war. During a week's organising work for the Labour Party in Leeds, Mrs Anderson Fenn spoke at a meeting organised by WIL and the WPC, presided over by Isabella, in which she expressed views long held by the latter when she said that true patriotism could only be found in a party on which both sexes worked together for the good of each other and the whole community. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen*, June 7 1918)

Given its purpose was to focus on peace campaigning WILPF had an election policy that encouraged members to back candidates who best promoted their aims, especially democracy and internationalism. This led Margaret Bondfield to resign as early as May 1918 since, as a member of the LP executive, she could not agree with this policy. (WILPF EC minutes May 16 1918) Isabella *remained* active in the WILPF but expressed exasperation in private letters about the complacent attitude, as she saw it, of many of the middle class leaders and sought ways to give this small organisation more mass appeal, for example through holding more public meetings. In January 1919, along with Mary Sheepshanks, secretary of Fight the Famine Council, Isabella wrote to the WILPF executive to open up the question of whether the League should affiliate to the Socialist International and the Labour Party but this was rejected on the grounds that it would be too constraining and that the best way forward was to concentrate on converting the middle classes. This did not satisfy many individual members and local branches. The ILP member Mrs Ayrton Gould, for example, resigned in 1919 because she organised a poster campaign about starving Europe and the League felt implicated. (WILPF EC Minutes 14 April, 1919) In Bristol, socialist women from the ILP were also members of the WIL and then WILPF. They had organised a Women's Peace Crusade and ensured that the ILP branch helped the post-war campaign to raise money to send a million teats to German babies. But when the WILPF decided not to affiliate to the LP the connection between the two movements was broken and ILP women increasingly sought to pursue their goals through the Labour Party. (Bristol ILP Branch, Minutes 1919).

Conclusion

The intention of this talk has been to explore some of the ideas and personal dilemmas faced by women during the peace campaign through a focus on Isabella Ford. It has suggested that

even those who were committed to peace politics could find it difficult to work together once the conflict was over, since they differed about methods of organisation and tactics as well as differing party loyalties. It might be worth ending with a final quote from Isabella Ford to remind ourselves that activists approached their politics as three dimensional human beings and, however serious the cause, there was also friendship and fun which helped to sustain them. Writing to Millicent Fawcett in 1924, the year of her death, when she hoped to travel to the IWSA congress in Washington she complained that she was too tired to do much travelling while there... 'I believe that immense lady from S. America- was it the Argentine? A doctor- will be there & she never looked tired. I have often wished at international conferences that foreigners could be really thoroughly exhausted at times. The worst are the new nations which lie around Poland and Russia and all about there. They are never tired in the very least. It was a great mistake to create them!' (18 March 1924)

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