

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

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Emily Maud Leaf
(1870 – 1941)
By Ruth Miller

“putting women in a better situation so the other issues that affected women, such as poverty, could be addressed by a female voice”

Emily Maud Leaf, a spinster living on a private income, was descended from the large Leaf family who resided in Streatham and the Norwood Hills. Emily was born on 25 September 1870 in the fifty-six room Burlington House, Crown Lane, Norwood. This was near the home of her grandfather William Leaf who lived at Park Hill House a large building set in expansive grounds, purchased with the fortune he had made by working as a silk merchant.

Growing up in Streatham, Emily was surrounded by her extended family; she had seven brothers and three sisters not to mention numerous cousins residing in the south London area. She studied locally, attending Miss Mason’s school in Streatham, although her brothers studied at Marlborough School and Harrow School. They went on to pursue their education at Cambridge and in 1894 she followed in their footsteps by becoming the only female family member to study there.

Emily spent two years at Newnham College, 1894 to 1896, but does not seem to have finished her studies. It is likely that her time spent here was when she came into contact with people involved in the fight for women’s suffrage. Another possible exposure to the suffrage cause would have been when Millicent Garrett Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), was invited to speak at Streatham Grove, home of the Nettlefords who were acquaintances and neighbours of the Leaf family.

It is unclear when Emily became a member of the NUWSS but she became their honorary press secretary from 1911. Aside from this interest in suffrage, she was involved in social and educational work in Bermondsey and was the secretary to the Women’s Liberal Association in St George’s Hanover Square.

The Leaf family had taken a great interest in philanthropic work. Emily’s aunts, Julia and Jane, ran the Leaffield Temperance Association, partly funding a coffee house in Streatham. Her older sister Mary worked with factory girls, had founded a home for ‘fallen



girls' and was on the Lambeth Board of Guardians. It is possible that these relatives had an interest in suffrage although no evidence exists to confirm that.

It seemed to be common among the Leaf siblings to remain unmarried; many of them shared a home in Arlie Gardens, Kensington. Emily's first cousin once removed, Katherine West wrote an account of her childhood *Inner and Outer Circles* and mentioned Emily's siblings describing the family's attitude to life as a wish to 'pull their weight'. Emily lived with her brother Henry at 4 Barton Street, Victoria, between 1905 until 1915. He had served in the Boer War and then in World War I along with their brother Edward. After the war, Henry married and moved to Chelsea while Emily remained at the house in Victoria. As Emily seems to be the one sibling who did not end up living in the shared home in Kensington, one can draw the conclusion that her political views caused a rift between her and her family.

Emily was involved in many causes but upon taking up her work as honorary press secretary with the NUWSS, she had to step away from her other work. As there is little written of her personal life, it is difficult to know who Emily was close to within the suffrage movement. She was a neighbour of [Mary Sheepshanks](#) when she lived in Barton Street. According to *From Liberal to Labour with Women's Suffrage The story of Catherine Marshall* by Jo Vallacott, Emily had a friendship with [Catherine Marshall](#). It was perhaps she who encourage Emily to become involved with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference at The Hague in 1915.

At the preliminary meeting to organise the event on of 26 February 1915, Emily was appointed to the executive committee. As differences in the opinions of the NUWSS president Mrs Fawcett and those wanting to attend the conference became apparent, there were a number of resignations among senior members including Emily who resigned as press secretary on 15 April 1915, days before the conference at The Hague. Although Emily was amongst those who had been given passports to travel to the Congress she was also amongst those who remained trapped in England.

Emily continued her involvement with the executive committee but resigned in 1916 to focus on war work. She joined the British Committee of the French Red Cross as a *canteener d'eclopes* (canteen worker) and served from May 1916 to July 1916. She was awarded the Victory Medal and British War Medal for her work.

We catch a glimpse of Emily's life at the end of 1916 in an archived correspondence between her and Mrs Fawcett. In this letter we see Emily speaking on behalf of her friend [Kathleen Courtney](#), one of the women who had resigned from the NUWSS to go to The Hague. Emily writes that Kathleen would like to see Mrs Fawcett as she misses her. The returned message is that Mrs Fawcett would rather things remained as they were. It seems that the resignations from the NUWSS had caused trouble between the women. It also shows Emily acting as a peacemaker between her friends and acquaintances and her continued support of women's suffrage.



Her ongoing involvement with what was to become the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is evident in a pamphlet on the Resolutions passed at the Third Congress of the WILPF in Vienna July 1921 when she represented the British section and was involved with the Fight the Famine Council.

Free of the constraints of married life and having a private income allowed Emily the choice to lead a life that she defined for herself. Her fight for the vote and a voice for women's issues suggests her priorities were about putting women in a better situation so the other issues that affected women such as poverty could be addressed by a female voice. She passed away on 2 March 1941.

