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These Dangerous Women

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Jane Whyte

1857 – 1944

By Vicky Deary

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Miss Jane Elizabeth Barbour was born in Bonskeid, Scotland in 1857. In 1881 she married The Reverend Dr Alexander Whyte and after a few years living together in 52 Melville Street, Edinburgh they moved into the house where they would together make history through their spiritual, social and political works, Number 7 Charlotte Square. Today the family home that housed the Whytes and their eight children from 1889 until 1927 is a beautifully preserved National Trust property in the New Town in Edinburgh.

Jane Whyte and her home are perhaps best known for their association with Abdu'l-Bahá' whom she first met in a prison in Palestine in 1906 when she was travelling with a companion. He was a leading figure of the Bahá'í faith and so inspired Whyte that she spent years after their initial meeting giving formal talks and writing articles about both him and his faith. Indeed, she was so moved by her encounter in Akka, and Abdu'l-Bahá's gift to her of the tablet of the “Seven Candles of Unity” that she is often credited with bringing the Bahá'í faith to Scotland and being one of the first Scottish Bahá'ís.

Although religion was no stranger to the Whyte household. Her husband, Alexander, was the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. Described as “a celebrated clergyman and well known throughout this part of the world”¹, he encouraged his wife's support and promotion of the Bahá'í faith.

As a strong feminist and devoted to promoting cross religious and cultural understanding, Jane Whyte single handedly brought together many conflicting organisations and united them under a common goal. It is no wonder then, when World War I began in 1914 that she felt the need to act to stop it. A promoter of unity, peace and understanding her entire life, she was a natural candidate to be chosen to travel to The Hague in 1915 to attend the International Women's Congress.

However, despite being in possession of a passport and a passion to share her message,



Whyte was not amongst the few women to attend the conference. As far as records show, there is no evidence to suggest that she attended the later Congresses in 1919 or 1926. One can imagine that her inability to go and speak on behalf of not just the women of Britain, but all of those who felt the injustice and futility of war was especially poignant for her as she lost her son, Robert Barbour, a Second Lieutenant in Black Watch (Royal Highlanders) later that same year.

Despite being unable to attend the conference with her sisters, Whyte's activism continued until her death in 1944. Her home during the early 1900s was the meeting place of many women's rights groups. She bravely brought together suffragists, suffragettes and anti-suffragists to hear a talk from her esteemed friend Abdu'l-Bahá, who preached to them the importance of unity and spirituality. But he also addressed the role of women more specifically, forewarning in a speech in 1913 that women should endeavour to study and train in every kind of science and art and social service; "Fit yourselves for responsibility", he said, adding with sad emphasis, "you will inevitably have it thrust upon you."²

Jane Whyte was a remarkable woman. Promoting unity and knowledge amongst the many groups she either headed, brought together or merely worked tirelessly for, she was truly a dangerous woman of her time. This was a legacy she would also pass on to her children; one of her daughters, Janet Chance was a pioneer of women's rights and worked tirelessly to reform laws governing abortion rights and campaigned for sexual liberalisation. Jane herself went on to become an active member in the Peace Movement of the 20's and 30s, remaining an influential figure with friends and guests such as Gandhi, with whom she frequently corresponded.

Mrs Whyte was many things to many people, her obituary summarises her life as a series of remarkable achievements:

"Mrs Alexander Whyte, who died recently, for a full half century took an active part in many of the most forward looking movements of her day...They included the provision of nursing services in the Hebrides long before any official body had realised their need, the interlinking of art and especially craftsmanship with the life of the church, the provision of coeducational residential schools, the carrying out of a survey in the depressed part of Edinburgh. Many plans destined to affect the life of the world were discussed round her table, where men of such varied personality and interests as General Booth,...Mr W.B Yeats, Baron Friedrich Von Hugel could be met."³

¹ Ahmad Sohrab, *Abdu'l-Bahá in Edinburgh: The Diary of Ahmad Sohrab*, p5

² Ibid. p 14

³ *The Glasgow Herald*. 6 December 1944

