

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

# These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

**Kathleen D'Olier Courtney**

**1878-1974**

Helen Kay and Pat Pleasance

**“[women] can... make their own contribution to the work and ideals of constructive peace”**

Kathleen Courtney was born on 11 March 1878 in Gillingham Kent, one of seven children. Her parents, Lieutenant (later Major) David Courtney, and Alice Mann were Anglo-Irish gentry, and both came from military backgrounds.

Kathleen was educated at the Anglo-French College in London, followed by a boarding school, and she then went to Dresden to study German. She read French and German at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University, and whilst there established a friendship with Maude Royden, who was to become involved in campaigning for women's suffrage.

After working for a while at the Lambeth Constitutional Girls' Club, Kathleen became involved with the women's suffrage movement, at first as Secretary of the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage in Manchester, and then as Honorary Secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in London.

At the beginning of the First World War there was a split in the NUWSS, and despite her friendship with Millicent Fawcett, Kathleen found that they were in disagreement over attitudes to the war. Millicent Fawcett ruled that the NUWSS would not send delegates to the International Women's Congress in The Hague in April 1915, and Kathleen was one of the NUWSS executive committee who resigned.

Kathleen was one of the British women who met with the Dutch women in February 1915 to plan for the Congress and travelled to The Hague early in April to work with the Dutch committee on the organisation for the Congress.



Because she was there in advance, before the English Channel and the North Sea were closed to shipping, Kathleen was one of three British women to reach The Hague Congress.

The International; Committee of Women for Permanent Peace was a new organisation formed at the Congress; Kathleen Courtney was elected chair of the British Section which was called the Women's International League (WIL).

In an article in *Towards Permanent Peace* (September 1915) reporting back on her time at The Hague Kathleen wrote "The Women's International Congress does not claim to have invented a new means for preventing war; it does not claim to have put forward an startling or original theory. It does not claim to have been a gathering of women of many countries, which proved that, even in time of war, the solidarity of women will hold fast; it does claim to have shown that women of different countries can hold out the hand of friendship to each other in spite of the hatred and bloodshed under which most international ties seem submerged. It claim too, to have shown that, while women have a special point of view on the subject of war, and while its wastefulness of human life must appeal to them with particular emphasis, they can, at the same time make their own contribution tot he work and ideals of constructive peace".

In 1916 Kathleen Courtney went to Salonika and Baxtia to work with the Serbian Relief Fund. She was later decorated by the Serbian Government. After the war, Kathleen helped her friend, Dr Hilda Clark, at the Friends' Relief Mission in Vienna, and also travelled to the Balkans and Poland.

In the 1920s Kathleen became the President of the British Section of the Women's international League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), a position that she held until 1933, when she resigned. At this time the organisation was strongly pacifist, and Kathleen came to believe that the call for complete disarmament was unrealistic.

In addition to her work for WILPF Kathleen was involved in many other campaigns relating to peace, arbitration issues and disarmament. She was an organiser of the Women's Pilgrimage for Peace in 1926, and also active in the international effort that culminated in the presentation of a petition signed by several millions to the Disarmament Conference of 1932.



In 1930 Kathleen took part with four other women from France, Germany, Japan and the US in the Women's Round Table at the Fifth National Conference on the Cause and Cure of War in Washington. A newspaper report at the time comments, "The subject that these promoters of peace are to discuss is: How far is the peace question women's responsibility and how may women be an effective force in the general movement?" This is a question which may still exercise our minds today.

Kathleen was always a strong supporter of the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations, and her speeches in 1945 were influential in persuading Americans of the value of the United Nations. Kathleen became Vice-Chair of the League of Nations in 1939, and in 1949 Chair and Joint President of the United Nations Association. Work in connection with these organisations involved her in extensive travelling abroad and many speaking engagements.

Although Kathleen Courtney decided to retire from her formal position in the United Nations Association in 1951, she continued to be active with the organisation, and to work for peace throughout her remaining years.

She was awarded a CBE in 1947, and created a Dame in 1952. In 1972 she was awarded the UN peace medal.

Kathleen Courtney died at the age of 96 in 1974.

