

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

Mary Sheepshanks

1872–1960

By Natasha Posner

“called for a negotiated peace and an end to the arms race”

Mary Sheepshanks was born on 25 October 1872, in Liverpool, the second of thirteen surviving children to John and Margaret Sheepshanks. Her father was a Church of England vicar in Bilton near Harrogate, who became Bishop of Norwich in 1890. She attended Liverpool High School until she was seventeen. In 1889 she was sent to Germany for a year to learn the language, living first in Kassel and then in Potsdam. At this time she enjoyed her first cultural events – concerts, plays and art. In 1892 she went to Newnham College in Cambridge, where she appreciated the freedom, independence and academic atmosphere of the university, and the collegueship of the college. She graduated in medieval and modern languages, before taking a 4th year course in Moral Science, Psychology, and the History of Philosophy and Economics.

In 1895 Mary started working with the Women’s University Settlement in Southwark and then Stepney. Two years later she was appointed as vice-principal of Morley College for Working Men and Women. She encouraged under-privileged women to enrol at the college and invited well known people to lecture: Virginia Woolf taught history evening classes, Ernest Shepherd and Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst lectured. She began the practice of holding women-only meetings for female students. She recognised how much the College meant to people in the area who came straight from work to classes without having had a proper meal all day.

At this time she was friends with Flora Mayor until her marriage and move to India. Mary fell in love with Theodore Llewelyn Davies who wanted to marry Meg Booth, but Meg refused him and he committed suicide. Mary appears to have regretted the lack of a partner and there were times in her life when she was lonely. Sybil Oldfield describes Mary as “a tall upright woman with bespectacled brilliantly blue eyes and a brusque manner,”¹

Mary was a member of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, believing that having the vote would benefit women and the state. Initially she also supported the



Women's Social and Political Union in their militant campaign to obtain women's suffrage. However her attitude to suffragettes became ambivalent. She was averse to violence and disliked their methods, though admiring individual acts of bravery. In 1913 she was asked to undertake a suffrage lecture tour of western and central Europe for the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) culminating in an IWSA meeting in Budapest. She spoke in French and German with women on local government, industry, temperance and education. Later that year Jane Addams persuaded her to become secretary to the IWSA in London, and the editor of its journal, *Jus Suffragii*.

At the outbreak of World War I, Mary was a strong opponent of Britain's involvement. She wrote that the war "brought her as near despair as I have ever been."² She signed the manifesto of the Union of Democratic Control initiated by Charles Trevelyan and supported by a number of leading figures. Mary wrote in *Jus Suffragii* that, "Each nation is convinced that it is fighting in self-defence, and each in self-defence hastens to self-destruction... thousands of men are slaughtered or crippled... and what gain will anyone have in the end?"³ She called for a negotiated peace and an end to the arms race. The journal *Jus Suffragii* maintained a neutral position while attacking the war itself.

With [Isabella Ford](#) and Elsie Inglis, she campaigned to bring a vast number of Belgian refugees from the Western front. In January 1915, she published the Open Christmas Letter to the women of Germany and Austria signed by 100 British women pacifists. In February, all the officers in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and ten members of the National Executive resigned after Millicent Fawcett attacked these peace efforts. In April of that year, she hoped to be able to respond to Aletta Jacobs invitation to suffrage members all over the world to attend an international congress of women in The Hague but, like other women in the UK, was unable to get there.

In 1918 Mary was appointed secretary of the Fight the Famine Council. In 1920 she lobbied the League of Nations unsuccessfully for the immediate admission of Germany and for a revision of the reparation clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. After the end of the war, she resigned as the editor of *Jus Suffragii* and then became a member of the Executive Committee of the British Section of WILPF. In 1921, she went on a trip to South America studying the economic and social conditions, returning to Europe via the USA.

Mary became the International Secretary of WILPF in 1927, replacing Emily Bach. At the office in Geneva she monitored the cases of political prisoners. In September 1928 she headed a deputation to the League of Nations to present an urgent memorandum calling for world disarmament. The following year she organised the first scientific conference, in Frankfurt-am-Maine, on chemical weapons and their use against civilians. Also in 1930, she organised a conference on statelessness attended by the International Council of



Women, the Society of Friends, the International Suffrage Alliance, the League of Rights for Man, and the League of Nations Union.

Mary resigned as WILPF International Secretary in 1930 because of her disapproval of what she saw as the pro-communist policies of the French and German members of the Executive. She was commissioned to conduct a fact-finding mission with Helen Oppenheimer, to East Galicia and Poland, investigating atrocities carried out by the government. Her report back was publicised throughout Europe. In 1932, she moved back to London.

In 1936 she was involved in sending medical help to republicans fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Also in 1936 she helped to find homes for Basque child refugees and her house in Highgate became a place of refuge for political dissidents from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. She was very concerned about the increasing power of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany, and on the outbreak of World War II, she renounced her pacifism. She was nevertheless opposed to blanket bombing, and to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. At this time she was employed by the BBC as a German translator.

In her later years she suffered badly from arthritis and was generally in poor health, needing an operation for cancer when she was 79 years. She still retained her many interests in music, art, books and politics. She was persuaded to begin work on her memoirs in 1955, but refused to add gossipy comments about the well-known people she had known in her life. After the resignation of her daily help because of a quarrel with a neighbour, she faced the prospect of being in a care home, as she was nearly blind and paralysed. She chose instead to commit suicide on 21 January 1960 at her home in Hampstead.

¹ Sybil Oldfield (1984) *Spinsters of this Parish.*)

² Mary Sheepshanks (1955) Autobiography)

³ *Jus Suffragii* (14 October 1914)

