

What it takes for peace

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An interview with Edith Ballantyne

The modern peace movement arose from the horrors of World War I. It was in 1915 in the midst of this conflict that the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) (WILPF) was formed. WILPF, celebrating its 100 year anniversary this year, continues its mission to bring about social and political equality and economic justice by nonviolent means to ensure real and lasting peace and true freedom.

Peace and nonviolence is a core value underpinning green thinking around the world. The [Global Greens Charter](#) includes a commitment to nonviolence and striving for a culture of peace and cooperation between states, inside societies and between individuals, as the basis of global security. Green thinking posits that security should not rest mainly on military strength but on cooperation, sound economic and social development, environmental safety, and respect for human rights.

Edith Ballantyne and Felicity Ruby discuss the mission and history of WILPF along with what it takes to bring about peace in the world in this fascinating interview.

Edith Ballantyne was Secretary General of WILPF from 1969 until 1992, and its International President from 1992 until 1998. Born in 1922, Edith and her family fled their home in Bohemia in the face of Nazism, and settled in Canada as refugees. She moved to Geneva in 1948 and lives there still.

Felicity Ruby is a former Director of WILPF's UN Office in New York. She has been an advisor to Senator Scott Ludlam, was recently Director of Internet Policy for Thoughtworks and is about to embark on a PhD at Sydney University on transnational political movements resisting mass surveillance.

Edited Transcript

Felicity: I'm here with Edith Ballantyne, a giant in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She was the Secretary General for 23 years and then International President for six years. How did you come to WILPF Edith?

Edith: When I was in Toronto as a refugee from Hitler, I was discovered or picked up by the Toronto Branch of WILPF. They had followed refugees from Hitler being settled in Canada and they realized they would probably be exploited, knowing very little about what their rights were. They contacted many of us when we ended up in Toronto and took me under their wing. I was 19 years old. Knowing very little English, they taught me English, and made me a member of WILPF. So I found out a lot about the problems in Canada and I also found out what my rights were as a so-called New Canadian. And I became very interested in what the organisation was doing. That's how I came into WILPF.

So basically the WILPF women were seeing solidarity and support of refugees as part of their peace work?

Absolutely, but not just refugees, also immigrants. Canada was actually going around the world looking for people to come to pioneer and clear land and so on. The WILPF women knew there was an awful lot of exploitation by the big railroad companies, particularly, who were organising settlements to clear land and promising eventually a little homestead somewhere. The WILPF women were very concerned about how people were being exploited within Canada, and they made it their business to let people know what their rights were. That was, to a very large extent, what Jane Addams had done in Chicago, working with immigrants, and teaching children English. The branch had a settlement house, which is what they called them, and that's where we often met and I got to know individual members. I used to spend a lot of time in their homes. Many of them were retired teachers so it was ideal for me. My goodness, if it hadn't been for WILPF I don't know what have happened to me. Pretty grim. The situation was very difficult for someone like me.

So you could speak basic English but were working as a servant in a wealthy person's house in Toronto.

I first worked on a farm. We did farm labour up north for two and half years in a Canadian Pacific Railroad settlement. There had been other groups before us and we were just another group; they got our labour for practically nothing. But then people just left because they couldn't go on like that forever, so after two, three, four, five years people drifted into the cities and try to make their living differently. So WILPF, in this settlement house, were helping many migrants and refugees coming in from Europe. I was just one of them. My whole family was one of them.

After the work on the farm, I came to Toronto and was helped by the Canadian Pacific Railroad to get a job as a maid in a mansion, a beautiful home and I looked after the cooking, and I wasn't a cook. I knew nothing! When I got there, the woman had a broken leg, I had to

help her. I had to look after her two children. I had to cook. I had to clean. I got up at 4am to make sure I got through the housework and then look after the children. It was the work of 12-14 hours every day with one half afternoon off. And one day the doorbell rang and someone from WILPF appeared and invited me to a meeting. They made sure my mistress was going to make sure I got to that meeting, told her that that was her obligation. And from then on my life changed.

So WILPF's conception of peace has always had a lot to do with justice, justice for the most vulnerable in a society, which you could say are the refugees and immigrants in a wealthy country like Canada and in Australia as well. Let's talk a bit more about WILPF's understanding of peace; you had an interesting introduction to it. How does WILPF talk about what it will really take to eradicate war? War is a system, it's also a culture and an economy; it's not just let's be nice to each other, which is often how peace is viewed, as weak, as simple, as naïve perhaps. So how does WILPF talk about the elements that make up an actual peace with justice?

When I came to Geneva and then worked for WILPF, I read a lot of the old Congress reports, from 1915 onwards. I also often referred to the history written by Margaret Timms and Gertrud Bussey of the first fifty years of WILPF. WILPF comes out of the suffrage movement and was started by women active in the Suffrage Alliance. The leadership of the Suffrage Alliance cancelled the 1915 Berlin Congress, because of the war, and because they were afraid that tension between members on both sides of the front line would destroy the alliance – essentially that war would break out in the alliance.

Aletta Jacobs, the chair of the Dutch Alliance objected. She said, no, this is when we women want to meet because we are not accepting war. This is exactly when we should have our congress and if we can't have it then, we should call a congress strictly to protest the war and to see what has to be done to make war an impossibility in the future. She got together with her Dutch alliance sisters and some of the alliance women in neighbouring countries and they met in February 1915 to decide whether or not to organise a congress.

They decided to go ahead. Ten weeks later they brought together 1136 women from 12 countries in the midst of war. In that short time, with the kind of technology they had, communication and crossing borders and coming together in The Hague for the congress was incredible. Many more would have registered but were refused passports or stopped at borders or transport had broken down. But still more than 1000 women got there. It was incredible what they achieved. They made it clear that it wasn't a peace conference but a women's congress to protest war and working for a system where war was impossible.

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The resolutions passed by the women were very interesting. One of the big proposals was that neutral countries should convene a conference and establish a permanent mediation in order to bring the war to an end. At the Congress they decided to send envoys to different countries at war against each other and also to the neutral countries. They were received very cordially, and apparently President Wilson particularly praised the women and their ideas as some of their ideas were then found in his 14-point peace proposal. When they came back they were very optimistic and pretty sure that the war would end in no time. Well it didn't, it went on for three more years.

They also decided they would meet at the same time and place as the peace settlement conference. When the victorious powers finally met in Versailles, the women couldn't join because the French government wouldn't allow the German women into the country. So the women met in Zurich, where they decided to establish a permanent organisation with the name Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and began to clarify their aims and principles. First of all, they denounced the Versailles Treaty because it made the losers pay heavily. They thought it was just the seed for another war. They also began to lay down what kind of foundations would be necessary upon which a permanent peace could be constructed. Among those were from the very beginning a more just society – both economic and social and of course equality and equity between women and men; women's rights were always one of the basic building stones for a permanent peace. So the organisation developed more and more. It's fascinating to read these early resolutions because in somewhat different language, they are saying exactly what WILPF is still saying today.

Sometimes in bolder terms! I feel like they were boldly critical of capitalism per se from the outset of the organisation than perhaps we are today. That is coming back now. The Global Financial Crisis has given people permission to say that capitalism is broken, is corrupt and wasteful and it is going to deplete our planet. The capitalist economic and class system that they talked about then is more able to be talked about now after the fear of the Cold War is over. They also talked about imperialism, didn't they? They talked about domination of imperialist power. I don't know if we are talking about that as much today, but it was an element.

I'm in my 90s now and looking back. When you say they were bolder in talking about the capitalist system and an alternative system, well, that was the language after WW1, and during it. With the revolution in Russia, there was a lot of talk about an alternative system, socialism, communism, but particularly socialism, was an accepted type of society that would be more equal and more focused on the human being. That was true all the way through WWII, basically until the Soviet Union broke up and the socialist systems in Eastern Europe disappeared.

Since then it's as if there is only one system, the capitalist system, which has become a kind of accepted fact; you try to modify it maybe from within. It's only now, again, beginning to be questioned because the system can't cope with the challenges we have, especially in the environmental field and the question of resources. We have to find a different way of manufacture, of distribution if we don't want to destroy this planet. But it's really in a way going back, we do have to find alternatives to the system in which we live. The women between the wars in WILPF, that was absolutely taken for granted.

But the elements of WILPF's version of peace are also about militarisation and weapons. The organisation has always had a strong focus on the deployment of weapons as a key feature of the problem. I think that WILPF is an anti-war and anti-militarist organisation of women. It's not a women's organisation first, it's not a peace organisation, it's an anti war organisation, it is opposed.

Absolutely, that's its origin

So that is one pillar and, second, is the class and economic system. And then there is imperialism, power itself, how power is distributed around the world and how power is distributed between people, between women and men, between people of different races.

These for me are the elements of peace we talk about as WILPF. But as you said, the women understood the need for a permanent organisation. WILPF came up with the idea of the League of Nations before it existed, and is one of the few organisations that witnessed and documented the rise and fall of the League of Nations, but also the rise of the UN. You and I, and many of WILPF women, have had a passion for the UN because the UN Charter is a peace document and the organisation arises out of a fatigue and knowledge of war. I'm prepared to fight for it and I'm prepared to defend it, but I'm saddened by what the UN has become, sometimes I really am. We need it, it's there, it's a structure that international law and the opportunity for peace rests on but the Security Council is a war machine and is acting in ways it was never envisaged that it would act. So I defend fiercely the UN, partly because WILPF thought of it, but I lament what has been done to it. How do you feel about it these days?

Oh yes, definitely. The UN as an organisation, or an international instrument of that kind, is absolutely essential. I think the UN Charter, in spite of some weak points, is still a very very important document and if it were really taken and developed, it's a mechanism that makes peace possible. It should be directly involved in maintaining peace as its main function. To maintain peace means a huge area of activity, from human rights to the environment and so on. It could do it. After going through WWII and seeing the destruction at the end of it, and where society was, I think there was a better understanding and acknowledgement that nations had to get together and work together, not in their national interest but in the common interest. That is the essence of the UN Charter, though we have our national and regional interests, we have to work for the common interest which means we have to sit down, talk, find solutions in which compromises are made but in which everyone in the long run gains because peace can be maintained. That has disappeared again, the whole notion of collective security and common interests. Now, quite openly, governments say, "this is not in our national interest". Well, that is absolutely denying the very essence of the UN Charter! When we talk about peace, we also need to look at the whole political structure that is denying us moving towards peace.

There are people and institutions that benefit from the UN and other efforts not advancing. WikiLeaks and Julian Assange have given us the gift of confirmation that there have been deliberate and ongoing efforts to corrupt and thwart the UN. Some people have been placed there deliberately to make sure things don't advance. We know from revelations, a tip of the iceberg I'd say, about efforts to corrupt and distract the organisation. This conspiracy is not a theory; it has been confirmed, and existed from the start. I feel like the UN is a product of hope but also an example of what's wrong, which is certain governments dominating; the US and friends and the 'five eyes' and the Anglosphere and the global north dominate; sometimes grossly and overtly and sometimes covertly and sneakily and secretly. Still, the fact of it being there, that people are smashed together, that NGOs are there, that people's movements get to participate means that there is an onward push, it's not just a theatre or a waltz that does the same thing – there is movement, it's a site of contestation. Chavez makes reference to a devil, Rouseff loses her temper about surveillance, so it's a venue, while the potential for people to come together happens, there are still sparks. I'm not going to say that it's all lost.

My goodness, if its lost, we are all lost. I was just reading yesterday about the Elders, a new development that Nelson Mandela started with former officials of the UN and others. It's quite a prestigious group. Kofi Annan and Brundtland together went to the Munich Security

Conference and made proposals about Security Council reform. They have some kind of status. Brundtland in her letter mentions some of the proposals they made. They want the UN to be more taken into account again because it's being sidelined from all of the big decisions that are being made. After all the the Security Council is the important body on maintaining peace and it is not doing very well. Reform of the Security Council has been around forever. They are now proposing more permanent members that would not have veto power, but they would be elected and could be re-elected. So who are those powers?



Edith at work. Photo from Felicity Ruby

To me, that's just going around the wrong way. WILPF, 15-20 years ago, had a campaign for Security Council reform that would open the Council, with no permanent members (maybe we have to put up with the five permanent members for some time given they are the ones to decide whether they will be there or not) and enlarge the Council to 36-45 members all elected and based on regional representation; out of 200 countries on earth that's not too big. There should be no more categories of specific members because there would then be permanent members based on their economic strength. No, let's be equal.

Even the smallest country like Malta has made more positive proposals in the common interest than any of the big countries. Size is not important, it's what the countries have to say and contribute that matters. Enlarge the Council, let regional groups decide on who to rotate in for the experience. But no more permanent members and eventually get rid of the five we have now. To some extent the permanent member idea and veto power has helped at times to avoid war, so I'm not entirely against the whole idea, but let's not have them exercise their power to decide everything because they work in their national interests.

Don't they also work in the interest of the international arms trade? We can have these representative bodies but while the arms trade continues, while there is investment and support and profit and benefit derived from proliferating all these weapons and the conditions for war they create, peace is less likely. I'm talking about the material conditions for war, but also theories and ideas, such as pre-emptive wars, the war on terrorism, and the humanitarian intervention or Responsibility to Protect idea, which was at first honestly trying to grapple with the question that Kofi Annan put to the General Assembly, what would we do in the case of another Rwanda? He was saying the UN Charter wasn't enough. What about this concept of humanitarian military interventions? I think you were suspicious from the get go, but your predictions for it has come to pass Edith "Nostradamus" Ballanytne. So tell us why you feel the way you do about humanitarian military interventions.

Well, basically, it's a faulty concept. To the extent that we know, the responsibility to protect doctrine is when a country cannot and will not protect its own citizens, then the responsibility to intervene to protect citizens moves to the international community. But at that point you can only intervene militarily. That is not what the UN is here for, to wage war. So it's a faulty concept. If we believe that there is a responsibility to intervene, you have to do it early, when you can do it peacefully. Then what can you do? I do not believe necessarily in economic sanctions because we know what that did to the population of Iraq. So the responsibility to protect human beings anywhere is a valid concept, but let's really think it through how to do that. Obviously the UN would be the instrument but it's not thought through. We have seen it practised to change regimes. Look at the mess we have seen where it has been applied so far. This concept and practice is not worthy of the UN.

You mentioned earlier the corruption and the selfishness and so on, the way the UN is used even by individuals placed on the staff. That brings one back to the national systems, our national governments. That is what the UN is about – a community of nations with a secretariat staffed on a geographical distribution from people coming out of national systems. The UN will never be better than the community of nations, including its citizens. So we have to look at home and see what we are doing, what is our own government doing, who are we electing? To build a United Nations system and a community of nations that will work together peacefully is going to take a lot of work, and that work starts right at home.

End.