

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

Louie Bennett

1870–1956

By Zoë Perry

“held a prominent position of leadership and authority in Ireland, and recognition internationally meant that her opinions were highly regarded”

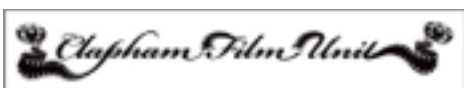
Louie Bennett was a dedicated campaigner for social reform throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1919 she joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

The historical landscape saw rapid and fundamental change between Louie's year of birth and that of the birth of WILPF, both in her native Ireland and across the world. Some pertinent aspects of this historical landscape include: the Irish campaign for women's suffrage as it unfolded in the early 1900s; global instability and changes wrought by World War I; and heightened conflict surrounding the movement to gain Irish legislative independence from the British parliament ('Home Rule').

Born in Dublin, Bennett's middle-class upbringing saw her educated in England, Ireland and Germany. Though scarce, evidence of her life before the age of forty hints at a serious-minded, practical, and responsible personality with a stubborn-streak and a strong sense of purpose. Bennett's authorship of two books in 1902 and 1908 show her active early attempts to develop a public voice.

From Bennett's birth into the 1900s the movement for women's suffrage gathered momentum worldwide. In Ireland, legal rights had been won in the fields of education (Trinity College, Dublin, 1904) and property (Married Women's Property Act, 1882); and women could vote in local government elections (The 1898 Local Government Act).

To begin with, Bennett attended an established women's suffrage group but by 1911 she had developed her thoughts and branched out to head two new organisations: the Irish Women's Reform League, and the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation (IWSF).



Her life-long friend Helen Chenevix, joint honorary secretary of the IWSF, offered vital support. She wrote often for *The Irish Citizen*, the official newspaper for the Irish Women's suffrage movement, then also for *Jus Suffragii*, the official journal of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, where she formed contacts with other prominent international suffragists.

In 1913, she attended a meeting in Budapest of the International Woman Suffrage Association (IWSA), an organisation that: "voiced radical feminism on an international level, giving members a sense of belonging to a great and irresistible current of world opinion."¹ At this point she held a prominent position of leadership and authority in Ireland, and recognition internationally meant that her opinions were highly regarded.

When World War I broke out in 1914, two concerns came to the fore for Louie: approaches to militarism and national identity. Using her political experience and contacts at home and abroad, she began to find new ways of confronting these issues.

The growing militancy of women suffragettes in the UK in the early 1900s had raised the issue of the legitimacy of violent methods of activism. At the outbreak of World War One, along with many other people, Bennett demanded that the issue of 'justified violence' be addressed. In February 1915, she clearly elaborated a commitment to both pacifism and internationalism through the pages of *The Irish Citizen*: "Suffragists of every country must face the fact that militarism is now the most dangerous foe of... all that women's suffrage stands for."²

When the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (IWCPP) met at the politically neutral site of The Hague, Bennett did not attend but demonstrated her support, as she was accustomed to doing, in writing. The IWCPP demonstrated a commitment to end violence forever through communication and co-operation between nations. This chimed with her pre-existing calls to women of "every country" to recognise "militarism" as their "greatest foe". Her statement of support suggested her esteem for, and sympathy with, the organisers of the 1915 Congress, which she called a, "brave plan".³ Her comments highlighted the courage of women to think ahead and to organise, in spite of uncertain circumstances.

Between 1915 and 1919 Bennett continued dialogue with the group, following their method: seizing opportunities to speak and act as part of a self-designated collective. At this point, the IWCPP had no formal structure. Bennett took this chance to claim a form of autonomy for her native Ireland, whose struggle for freedom from England was intensifying. Initially given a formal role as a representative on the British committee, she campaigned from the outset for separate Irish representation. She wrote on several occasions to the Honorary Secretary of the IWCPP and submitted a formal resolution to



the ICWPP in October 1915 requesting representation for any nation perceiving itself as a unique polity in pursuit of self-government. She joined a chorus of voices from the Netherlands, Poland, Germany and England who in 1915 called for: “autonomy and a democratic parliament for every people.”⁴

In January 1916 the Irish section took decisive action, renaming itself the Irishwomen's International League (IIL). Whilst tensions in Ireland peaked with the Easter Rising in 1916, Bennett wrote a campaign letter from IIL (and by extension from IWCPP) to heads of state on both sides of the conflict for “Home Rule”. Thus Louie Bennett's writings were taking on unofficial political force, using assumed support from IWCPP. Eventually, in December 1916, the organisers of IWCPP formally accepted IIL as an independent national organisation. By 1919, therefore, Louie Bennett and Ireland (in the form of the IIL) were represented in Zürich where the IWCPP was organisationally formalised into the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

The upheaval of wartime had offered many people a chance to think and act outside of the status quo. Both Bennett and an international league of women took opportunities to act immediately in the interests of what they perceived would be beneficial, in the long-term, for humanity. In 1919 their cause was enshrined in the name of a new organisation, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), who work for permanent peace and freedom.

¹ Evans, Richard; *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America, and Australasia, 1840–1920* (1977), pp.251-252, cited in Rosemary Cullen-Owens, *Louie Bennett*, 2001, p.29

² *The Irish Citizen*, 27 February 1915, cited in Cullen-Owens, 2001, p.35

³ *International Council of Women (ICW) Report*, 1915, p.207

⁴ *International Council of Women (ICW) Report*, 1915, pp.36, 37, 105, 111, 166

