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These Dangerous Women

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Margaret Bondfield
1873–1953

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“As a result of her dedication to work, Margaret became the first female cabinet minister”

Margaret Bondfield, the daughter of William Bondfield and Anne Taylor, was born on 17th March 1873 in Chard, Somerset. She was the tenth child in the family of eleven children.

William Bondfield had worked in the textile industry since he was a young boy and was well known in the area for his radical political beliefs. As a young man he had been secretary of the Chard Political Union. He had also been active in the Anti-Corn Law League of the 1840s. Entirely self-educated, he was fascinated by science and engineering. Margaret’s parents gave her a non-conformist faith and ethic and strong views on the active role of women in politics and the workplace, whilst she educated herself by reading widely on social, ethical and spiritual issues.

Margaret was an extraordinary woman and her unique character helped her to achieve great things and played a crucial role in her political career. She was keen to work and earn a living by herself. At the age of fourteen she left home to serve an apprenticeship in a large draper's shop in Hove.

She later recalled: “When I first went to Brighton for a holiday in 1887 I had the chance of a job as apprentice to Mrs. White of Church Road, Hove, a friend of my sister Annie. I eagerly grasped this opportunity of earning my living.” While working in Hove, Margaret became friendly with one of her customers, Louisa Martindale, a strong advocate of women's rights. Margaret was a regular visitor to the Martindale home where she met other radicals living in Brighton. Louisa Martindale lent Margaret books and was an important influence on her political development.



In 1894 Margaret moved to London to live with her brother Frank. Soon after getting a job in a draper's shop, she was elected to the Shop Assistants Union District Council, which led on to her further career in the Women's Industrial Council. Eventually, Bondfield became known as Britain's leading expert on shop workers. She was not only active in the fight for labourers' rights, but also one of the key figures in women rights movements. In 1906 Margaret with her friend Mary Macarthur established the first women's general union, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW).

Margaret also became the chairperson of the Adult Suffrage Society. In 1906 she made a speech where she said: "I work for Adult Suffrage because I believe it is the quickest way to establish a real sex-equality..." Margaret fought for all women, no matter their social class, to get the vote, which made her quite unpopular among the middle-class suffragettes. In 1910 the Liberal Government asked her to serve as a member of its Advisory Committee on the Health Insurance Bill. Her efforts were rewarded when she persuaded the government to include maternity benefits.

Margaret had an extraordinary and charming character. Her close friend Mary Macarthur recalls their first meeting: "I saw a thin white face and glowing eyes, and then I was enveloped by her ardent, young hero-worshipping personality. She was gloriously young and self-confident. It was a dazzling experience for a humdrum official to find herself treated with the reverence due to an oracle by one whose brilliant gifts and vital energy were even then manifest." Sylvia Pankhurst, another active suffragette, described Margaret as an especially charming character: "Miss Bondfield appeared in pink, dark and dark-eyed with a deep, throaty voice which many found beautiful. She was very charming and vivacious and eager to score all the points that her youth and prettiness would win for her against the plain middle-aged woman with red face and turban hat... Miss Bondfield deprecated votes for women as the hobby of disappointed old maids whom no-one had wanted to marry."

Margaret's charm, combined with her dedication and hard-working nature, paved her way to success in everything she did. She described her own attitude to work in her autobiography, *A Life's Work* (1948): "I concentrated on my job. This concentration was undisturbed by love affairs. I had seen too much – too early – to have the least desire to join in the pitiful scramble of my workmates. The very surroundings of shop life accentuated the desire of most shop girls to get married. Long hours of work and the living-in system deprived them of the normal companionship of men in their leisure hours, and the wonder is that so many of the women continued to be good and kind, and self-respecting, without the incentive of a great cause, or of any interest outside their job... I



had no vocation for wifehood or motherhood, but an urge to serve the Union.” As a result of her dedication to work, Margaret became the first female cabinet minister in 1929.

Just two days after Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, the NUWSS announced that it was supporting the war effort and suspended all political activity until the conflict was over. Due to her pacifist beliefs, Margaret decided to take another path and joined the Women's Freedom League, establishing the Women's Peace Crusade, an organisation that called for a negotiated peace.

Margaret wrote: ‘I shared the views of those who blamed secret diplomacy, and in particular Sir Edward Grey, who had failed to make it clear which side Great Britain would take. The shots at Sarajevo did more than kill an Archduke and his Duchess. They gave the signal for a blood bath in Europe; and yet our Foreign Secretary dallied on the fence until the invasion of Belgium had actually begun.’ As a result of her views and beliefs, she was amongst the twenty-four British women and suffragettes who tried to go to the Peace Conference in The Hague. Margaret never reached The Hague, but the closure of Tilbury docks in April 1915 was only a small obstacle, which did not stop her passionate work in feminist movements and campaigns against war.

