

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

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Chrystal Macmillan
1872-1937

By Katrina Gass and Helen Kay

“a leading figure in international women’s organisations”

Chrystal Macmillan campaigned all her life for women to achieve full citizenship rights with men. She was a Scottish feminist and peace activist, the first female science graduate from the University of Edinburgh with a first class honours degree in Mathematics and an Honours degree in Moral Philosophy.

She campaigned throughout Scotland for women's right to vote. With four other women graduates she applied for the vote under the University Franchise. When the Universities refused their application, the women fought the case right up to House of Lords where, in 1908, Chrystal addressed their Lordships, who decided to refuse the application on the grounds that ‘person’ did not include ‘woman’. Her skill in arguing the legal case was recognised by Scottish Press who named her ‘the Scottish Portia’; and indeed she was one of the first group of women to become barristers in London in 1924.

When World War I began, Chrystal Macmillan looked for peace activism. As secretary of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance [IWSA], she helped organise the International Women’s Relief Committee soon after hostilities broke out in August 1914. Two months later, in response to a call from Dutch women who were experiencing a major humanitarian crisis as 80,000 Belgian refugees had fled into Holland, she travelled with [Mary Sheepshanks](#) to Flushing, Netherlands with a large consignment of food. By late October 1914 the International Women’s Relief Committee, in consultation with Dutch women were providing food and clothing for refugees from the fall of Antwerp.

In late 1914 Chrystal Macmillan was one of one hundred British women who signed the ‘Open Christmas Letter’ in *Jus Suffragii*, a peace-seeking exchange between women of warring nations. Then, in cooperation with [Aletta Jacobs](#), she worked with Dutch women to organise a large International Congress of Women, where 1,136 women from Europe and North America gathered in April 1915 to discuss the causes of war and how women might influence political leaders to resolve international disputes through peaceful mediation.



The 180-strong contingent of British women was greatly reduced as the North Sea and English Channel was declared a war zone and closed to normal commercial shipping. Even the 24 'sensible' women provided with passports by British Government were stranded at Tilbury, unable to cross the North Sea. Chrystal Macmillan was one of only three British women at the Congress, the others being [Kathleen Courtney](#) and [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence](#).

The Congress elected an international team of five envoys, including Chrystal Macmillan, who travelled back and forward across war-torn Europe and to USA during the summer months of 1915, visiting 14 belligerent and neutral countries, and meeting with 24 influential leaders: Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, Presidents, the King of Norway and the Pope. The women urged the political leaders to set up Continuous Mediation by neutral countries to end the war. Each statesman declared himself sympathetic but not one leader would take the first step and the war continued unabated.

After the war, Chrystal Macmillan went to Zürich in May 1919 as a delegate to the Second International Congress of Women. The Congress strongly condemned the 'Peace Terms' that were being planned for Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, noting that these terms would create further animosity which would lead to future wars. Chrystal Macmillan carried the Congress' condemnation to the ongoing Paris Peace Conference, but the men who were negotiating the settlement made no changes to the treaty.

The organisation established by the 1919 Zürich Congress was named the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom which, in 2015, is the oldest women's peace organisation.

In the run up to WWI, suffragists spoke out against the nationality laws. Following her experience of providing relief to women of many nationalities during the first few months of the war, Chrystal Macmillan gave voice to the protest against the legislation which deprived or imposed British nationality on women without their consent. She continued to lead campaigns throughout the 1920s and 1930s in Britain and at The League of Nations on the Nationality of Married Women, in an effort to secure the right of women, whether married and unmarried, to have the same full nationality rights as men.

By early 1918, most British women who had attained the age of 30 were given the right to vote and hold office. Following the passing of The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, which enabled women to become members of the legal profession, Chrystal Macmillan applied to Middle Temple as a pupil. She was called to the bar on 28 January 1924 and in 1926 joined the Western Circuit.

Chrystal Macmillan co-founded the Open Door Council for the repeal of legal restraints on women, especially in the professions. She worked to lift restrictions, and so give women



of all classes, an equal opportunity in the workplace. In 1929, she co-founded an international group, the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker, and served as President of the organisation until her death in 1937.

Although she was a leading figure in international women's organisations, Chrystal Macmillan's pioneering work was not always visible. Despite her abilities as an able and humorous public speaker, her main work after 1920 was undertaken in committees and in the scrutiny of legislative reforms. Her colleagues found her a strong personality who could be tiresome in her attention to detail: they complained that conference times could be extended by her insistence on arguing the case around a small amendment but another acknowledged that she had an astonishing foresight in noticing legislative changes that would, in time, discriminate against women.

In obituaries, colleagues described her as a brave and gifted woman with a brilliant and enlightened mind, who showed leadership in every enterprise she became involved in, inspiring and encouraging all those with whom she worked, especially younger women such as Gertrud Baer who became President of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1932-37. Throughout her life, Chrystal Macmillan's integrity and commitment to equality and justice for women was never in question.

