

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

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Edith Picton-Turbervill

1872-1960

By Pat Pleasance

“worked tirelessly for improvement in the position of women”

In her autobiography *Life is Good* (1939) Edith Picton-Turbervill refers to her attempt to travel to The Hague for the Peace Congress:

“I was always troubled over the official and general attitude towards peace, and had been one of the few women who in 1915 had tried to go to the Hague to discuss peace with women of other nations. Winston Churchill, who was then First Lord of the Admiralty, stopped that effort by not allowing our steamer to leave Tilbury Dock! I note in my diary ‘Intercessions in the churches for peace. I am in a fog. We pray for peace but everyone is very angry if we talk of peace.’”

By this time Edith was in her forties, and her life had already been eventful.

She was born Edith Picton-Warlow, the daughter of Indian army officer, Captain John Picton-Warlow. One of large family, including three sets of twins, she spent much of her childhood with an aunt in Brighton until her parents returned from India. In 1892 her father inherited the Ewenni Priory estate in Glamorgan and the family name was changed to Picton-Turbervill.

Edith was always deeply religious, and a conversion experience in 1895 made her determine that her future life should be dedicated to missionary work. After training, she spent some years in India, and during that time she worked with the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), lectured on English literature and opened the first holiday home in Simla for Indian girls.

Ill health forced a return to England, at first temporarily, but in 1908 permanently. Here her interests widened to include topical issues including the suffrage campaign. She records a discussion with Mrs. Pankhurst, trying to persuade the latter to pursue less militant tactics but Mrs. Pankhurst was quite unmovable. Edith must have been impressive because Mrs. Pankhurst remembered the discussion years later when they met again.



Edith must also have made an impression with her work for the YWCA, because in 1909 she was asked to be head of the YWCA Foreign Department (later “Overseas Department”). She was national Vice-President from 1914-1920, and 1922-1928. Despite being involved in numerous other committees it was the YWCA to which she devoted the majority of her time in the war years. She was appalled at the conditions in which girls in the munition factories had to work, and within the YWCA took charge of a campaign to provide hostels, canteens and clubs for girls, both in this country and for those working in France in the Women’s Royal Air Force. The campaign raised about £250,000, a huge sum in those days. As a result of her work she was awarded an OBE in 1917.

Religion was always a dominant factor in her life. She was a member of the Church of England, which at that time took a traditional attitude to the role of women. Convinced that women should be allowed to play a full part in Church life, she campaigned with [Maude Royden](#) for women to become priests in the Church of England, and wrote a book with Canon Streeter *Woman and the Church*, published in 1917. She also engaged in a public debate on the issue in Church House. In this she was years ahead of her time as women were not allowed to be ordained priests until very recently. She also wrote a number of other books on religious issues.

In addition to trying to go to The Hague for the Women’s Congress in 1915, Edith found time to continue her support for WILPF’s work. This included opening a WILPF bazaar at Central Hall on 5th April 1919, when she spoke “of our aims and work during the war and the work that lay before us in the future”. She is also listed in the 5th WILPF Annual Report as having been present at the Third International Congress in Vienna in 1921.

Politics beckoned, and in 1919 Edith became a member of the Labour Party. After two unsuccessful attempts, she became the Member of Parliament for The Wrekin in Shropshire in 1929, remaining an MP until 1931, when she was defeated by the Conservative candidate. During this time she successfully promoted a private member’s Bill to prevent the death sentence being pronounced on pregnant women convicted of murder. Previously the death sentence was first passed in court and only subsequently could a woman reveal she was pregnant, when the sentence was delayed until after the birth of the child. In practice it was not then carried out and the sentence was often changed to penal servitude. In her speech to the House of Commons she referred to a case where a woman had murdered her child because she was destitute and could not provide for it. Even Judges disliked the duty of having to pronounce a death sentence in such distressing cases.



Her time in parliament also included serving on the ecclesiastic committee of the Houses of Commons and Lords, and campaigning for facilities for women Members of Parliament.

Whilst she did not again return to the House of Commons, Edith remained active on political issues between the wars, and also attended a number of international meetings of women's organisations. One of these was the International Congress of Women Citizens held in Turkey in 1935, where she was head of the British delegation. In 1936 she was appointed to a three-member commission looking into established practices in Malaya and Hong Kong regarding indentured girl servants, called mui tsai. They were thought to be effectively slaves, and she wrote a minority report calling for registration and inspection. Eventually she won her point with the Colonial Office and child welfare was much improved.

In the second World War she worked for the Ministry of Information. Although by this time she was in her seventies, she became President of the National Council of Women Citizens in 1944, and continued to write, lecture and appear on radio and television.

Throughout her life Edith travelled extensively and had a wide circle of acquaintances, including left wing politicians and social reformers. A tall woman with abundant energy, she made her mark in the causes she supported, and in particular worked tirelessly for improvement in the position of women.

