

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

# These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

**Esther Roper**

**1868 – 1938**

By Ann Kramer

**“encouraged her working-class sisters to become more actively involved in the fight for the women’s vote”**

Born in Lancashire, Esther’s parents were missionaries and she was largely brought up by her mother’s grandparents and educated by the Church Missionary Society. She went on to become one of the first women to attend Owen College, Manchester, where she studied English Literature, Political Economy and Latin.

Esther graduated in 1891 but continued an interest in education that demonstrated her already existing concern for social justice and the vulnerable. In 1895 she helped to found the Manchester University Settlement in Ancoats. Its aim was to bring learning and culture to impoverished people within the community while at the same time encouraging students and staff to make links with and understand the difficulties and social problems experienced by the working class. The Settlement continues charitable work to this day.

By the early 1890s the women’s suffrage movement began to enter a new and more active phase. A women’s suffrage bill had once again been rejected in the House of Commons but only by twenty three votes so leading activists such as Mrs Fawcett and [Isabella Ford](#) decided to build on this promising result and planned a mass petition – the ‘Special Appeal – which was launched in 1893 to be signed by “Women of All Parties and All Classes”.

Campaigning was particularly active in the north west of England, largely due to the efforts of Esther, who in 1893 became secretary of the Manchester Suffrage Society, a post she held until 1905. Throwing herself into the suffrage campaign, she re-energised the Society, organising meetings and promoting the Special Appeal among both Liberals and socialists. She encouraged her working-class sisters to become more actively involved in the fight for the women’s vote, not least to widen the campaign and move it out of its predominantly middle-class base. She appointed two working-class women to take and promote the Special Appeal into the cotton towns. In 1897 the Manchester Society changed its name to



the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage and soon became part of the umbrella organisation, Millicent Fawcett's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

In 1896, exhausted from her campaigning work, Esther took a holiday in Italy, where she met Irish poet and aristocrat Eva Gore-Booth. The two were immediately attracted to each other and on their return to Manchester decided to set up home together. From then on, and until Eva's death in 1926, the two women were almost inseparable and campaigned together for the suffrage.

Over the next few years, Esther and Eva, together with other activists such as Selina Cooper, worked with what became known as the radical suffragists of the north of England, the mill workers who campaigned strenuously for women's right to vote. In 1900, Esther and Eva launched the *Women's Labour News* and three years later helped to set up the Lancashire and Cheshire Women's Textile and Other Workers Representation Committee, which organised for the first women's suffrage candidate to stand in a general election.

Though radical, Esther and Eva were always suffragists; like others in the NUWSS they distanced themselves from the militancy of the Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which was formed in 1903 and which from 1906 adopted an increasingly confrontational programme of activism.

When the rifts began to appear in the women's suffrage campaign at the outbreak of World War I, Esther and Eva, describing themselves as "extreme pacifists" were among those who opposed the war, turning their considerable organising and campaigning skills towards working for peace. They immediately started relief work with German men, women and children living in England, who were being victimised. They also later worked with German prisoners of war.

The two women were also amongst at least 100 signatories to the historic "Open Christmas Letter", which was organised by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). Addressed 'To the Women of Germany and Austria' it expressed solidarity with women across the warring lines and appealing to international womanhood.

When invitations flooded out to women's organisations across the world to attend the women's congress in The Hague in 1915, Esther and Eva were amongst those who resigned from the NUWSS and began work on helping to organise the Congress, forming the British Committee of the International Women's Congress. Despite all her work, Esther's plans to travel to the Congress were thwarted by the closure of the English Channel and the North Sea.



Esther Roper went on to become a founder member of the Women's International League, (later the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, WILPF) that was born and launched at the Congress and worked with [Catherine Marshall](#) and other activists in the No-Conscription Fellowship to support conscientious objectors. She attended tribunals, recording the outcomes and it was largely thanks to women such as Esther that the No-Conscription Fellowship was able to continue its activities throughout the war years, despite its leadership and most of its members being imprisoned.

Esther also became involved in the Women's Peace Crusade, an extraordinary and radical grass-roots initiative, which was launched in the summer of 1917 with Helen Crawford. It demanded "a people's peace" based on arms limitation and international co-operation and repudiated the right of any nation to conquer or annex another and it aimed to take its anti-war message into working class communities. Esther and Eva travelled around Britain speaking to various groups that sprang up. In August 1917 they arrived in Nelson, Lancashire to join Selina Cooper and some 1,200 women of the Nelson Peace Crusade for a procession to the local recreation ground where they would speak to the crowd. Carrying banners, they arrived at the recreation ground to be met by an extremely hostile crowd, who according to local reports howled them down. For those who attended the rally it was a frightening experience but typical of the public reaction to war resisters.

Following the end of the war, Esther continued working with WILPF and also became involved with the Committee for the Abolition of Capital Punishment and worked for prison reform.

Following Eva's death in 1926, Esther edited and wrote the introductions for *The Poems of Eva Gore-Booth* (1926) and *The Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (1934). Both women had been close friends of the Countess. Esther remained a member of WILPF and committed to social justice until her death. She died on 28 April 1938 and was buried next to Eva in St John's Churchyard, Hampstead.

