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These Dangerous Women

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Miss (Agnes) Maude Royden

1876 – 1956

By Abigail Shapiro

“everywhere there was pacifism the women’s movement advanced”

Agnes Maude Royden (known as Maude) was a noted author, campaigner and preacher on women’s rights, pacifism and Christian values. Maude was born on 23 November 1876 at Mossley Hill, near Liverpool, the youngest of eight children to Sir Thomas Bland Royden, a ship owner and MP, and his wife Alice Elizabeth. She grew up at Frankby Hall in Cheshire, attended Cheltenham Ladies' College, and, later, Lady Margaret Hall at the University of Oxford.

After graduating with a degree in History, Maude worked in slum settlements in Liverpool improving living conditions for the poor. She became particularly interested in the rights of working women, taking an active role at the Victoria Women's Settlement, a social work centre for women’s and children’s health and education. During this time, Maude became increasingly interested in Christianity. At the invitation of a friend, she attended several meetings in Oxford with The Reverend George William Hudson Shaw, a university lecturer and Anglican priest, with whom she developed a close friendship. In 1902, Maude went to live with Shaw and his wife Effie in Oxfordshire, where she spent several years enjoying the companionship of the couple and studying the teachings of the Church as well as her views on gender parity.

Shaw helped Maude get work at the University of Oxford as a lecturer of English Literature. She greatly enjoyed teaching and began to deliver public lectures, speaking of her faith and the rights of women. By 1905, Maude’s reputation had spread across the country and she was invited to be a speaker for the non-militant suffragists under the leadership of Mrs Fawcett. Maude had now fully embraced the suffrage movement, and in 1909 was elected to the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), frequently speaking of its cause. From 1912 to 1914 she was the Editor of *The Common Cause*, the journal of the Union until she – and several other prominent executive members – resigned due to the approach the NUWSS was taking to



the war which they publicly opposed. The disagreement began when the NUWSS refused to promote peace during the war, rejecting an invitation to send delegates to the International Women's Congress for Peace in The Hague in 1915.

Maude, along with other women such as [Margaret Ashton](#), [Helena Swanwick](#) and her old friend from University [Kathleen Courtney](#), established a new group called the Women's International League (WIL). The WIL's first act was to organise delegates to attend the conference in The Hague. Interest was overwhelming with nearly 180 women expressing the desire to attend.

Speaking at a conference only a day before she was due to go to Holland, Maude said:

“War was the woman's worst enemy, and it affected the whole position of women as a sex. The advance of civilisation depended on their realisation of the fact that men and women were not and could not be governed by violence, but only by spiritual force. Everywhere there was pacifism the women's movement advanced; everywhere there was militarism it went back.”¹

But speaking of peace during the war was controversial and any opposition to the war effort was condemned. As Millicent Fawcett, another suffrage campaigner, pointedly said “it is akin to treason to talk of peace”. Although Maude's application for a passport was successful, she never made it to Holland.

Speculations have been made as to the delays and denial of permits. Sheila Fletcher's biography *Maude Royden: A Life*², suggests that a well-connected public enemy of Maude's was directly involved. Fletcher's research uncovered a letter from Lady Margaret Elizabeth Child Villiers (1875–1959), Countess of Jersey and noted anti-suffrage campaigner, to Arthur Nicholson at the Home Office. She wrote of Maude on 7 April 1915, just two weeks before the WIL was due to go to The Hague, that she was

“...a keen suffragist who misrepresents facts about the female labour market and successful in rousing male feelings...I think it is dangerous idea that 100 English women of the Suffrage – Peace – Ethical – Reconciliation class should, at this crisis, go and orate at the Hague in company with a considerable number of German women. The one way to stop it would be to absolutely refuse passports. I think...that whoever gives passports should find out quietly in advance who the women are – but not refuse them absolutely till near enough to the time to prevent their making other arrangements! ... We are supposed to be under Martial Law [sic] but I suppose these women could not be stopped from talking indirect treason if they once got into Neutral ground.”



The Peace Congress established the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, which concentrated its focus on peace during the war. Maude remained involved with the group for many years, although her interest shifted after the war to the role of women in the Church. In 1929 she began the official campaign for the ordination of women when she founded the Society for the Ministry of Women and she was the first woman to become Doctor of Divinity in 1931.

Maude went on to make several worldwide preaching tours from the 1920s to the 1940s, maintaining all the while her commitment to peace until in 1939, when she publicly renounced pacifism believing Nazism to be a greater evil than war. In 1944, she married the recently widowed Reverend Hudson Shaw whom she had loved for more than forty years but in a tragic twist, he died only two months after their marriage.

¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 20th April 1915

² Sheila Fletcher's biography *Maude Royden: A Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989)

