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# These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

**Helena Swanwick**

**1864-1939**

By Nan Sheppard

**‘Most men have not a notion how immensely better the world could be made for them, by the full co-operation of women’**

Helena Swanwick was a feminist, writer and public speaker who worked tirelessly to promote peace and equality.

Born in Munich in 1864, her family moved to England when she was four.

Influenced by reading 'The Subjection of Women' by John Stuart Mill at school, Helena rebelled against her parents' views on the role of women. She complained that "A boy might be a person but not a girl. This was the ineradicable root of our differences. All my brothers had rights as persons; not I." Despite her obvious intelligence, Helena's parents refused to contribute to her university education when she received a partial scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge. Her mother believed that marriage and dependence was the only acceptable life for a woman.

Fortunately, a sympathetic godmother agreed to pay Helena's fees and her education could continue. Armed with her degree, Helena was appointed lecturer in Psychology at Westfield College in London. She also worked as a journalist, and contributed to her family's finances, but her mother didn't approve of her lifestyle until Helena finally married in 1888.

Helena and her husband Frederick, a lecturer in mathematics, moved to Manchester where they met with the city's cultural elite.

In 1905, Helena joined the North of England Suffrage Society, and her work for the pacifist cause began in earnest. She believed strongly in non-violence and tolerance and spoke extensively throughout England and Scotland in approval of equality between the sexes, socialism and peace. She had a way of engaging with her audiences, showing an



understanding of their working-class struggles and reaching thousands with her powerful addresses.

“The encouragement we got from the poor and the inarticulate was best of all. Said one, ‘What you bin saying, Ah bin thinkin long enough, but Ah niver gotten t words reet...’”

Helena became editor of *The Common Cause* in 1909, opposing the Women’s Social and Political Union for what she saw as its unnecessarily anti-male stance. Her own book, *The Future of the Women’s Movement*, was published in 1913.

Despite not being one of the women who attended the International Congress of Women in 1915, Helena was one of the founding members of the Women’s international League (WIL), serving as chairperson from 1915 to 1922. by which time it was the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). From the outbreak of World War I, she began campaigning for peace and the formation of an international peace-keeping organisation. When the League of Nations was set up in 1919, Helena was critical of the permissions granted to use force and economic sanction as paths to peace, and believed that the Versailles settlement was an unjust and unsustainable treaty that would lead to future conflict. She wrote in her pamphlet, *Live Dangerously* that “Those who ‘make peace by preparing for war’ are not pursuing the right way; those who ‘plan war to end war’ are not pursuing the right way; those who plan violence in the cause of peace are not pursuing the right way.”

Helena continued to write and became editor of *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the Union of Democratic Control. She also wrote for the feminist journal, *Time and Tide*. She published several short stories, and continued to campaign for gender equality and peace.

In 1927 she wrote, “It is my conviction that most men have not a notion how immensely better the world could be made for them, by the full co-operation of women.” Helena’s autobiography, *I Have Been Young*, was published in 1935.

In 1929, Helena served as the UK’s substitute delegate to the League of Nations. But in the 1930s, she became disenchanted by the talk of war, growing fascism in Europe and international attitudes towards violence. Helena’s husband suffered ill health and died in 1934. Finally, growing increasingly depressed and struggling with her own health issues, Helena committed suicide with an overdose of sedatives, just a few months after the start of World War II.

