



# Heroes of Peace

## Profiles of the Scottish peace campaigners who opposed the First World War

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### Introduction

The coming year will see many attempts to interpret the First World War as a 'just' war with the emphasis on the heroic sacrifice of troops in the face of an evil enemy. No-one is questioning the bravery or the sacrifice although the introduction of conscription sixteen months after the start of the war meant that many of the men who fought did not do so from choice and once in the armed forces they had to obey orders or be shot. Even many of the volunteers in the early stages of the war signed up on the assumption that it would all be over in a few months with few casualties.

We want to ensure that there is an alternative – and we believe more valid – interpretation of the events of a century ago made available to the public. This was a war in which around ten million young men were killed on the battlefield in four years, about 120,000 of them were Scottish. Proportionately Scotland suffered the highest number of war dead apart from Serbia and Turkey. It was described as the 'war to end wars' but instead it created the conditions for the rise of Hitler and the Second World War just twenty years later as a result of the very harsh terms imposed on Germany and the determination to humiliate the losing states. It also contributed to some of the current problems in the Middle East since, as part of the war settlement, Britain and France took ownership of large parts of the Ottoman Empire and divided up the territory with no reference to the identities and interests of the people.

Faced with war hysteria and the almost universal pro-war jingoism from the newspapers of the day, to stand out against the crowd and oppose the war required moral courage. For those sent to prison because of their opposition, it also required physical courage because of their treatment in prison. It is understandable as so often in war that when people had friends and relatives engaged in battle, they wanted to believe that the cause was justified and to reject those who question it. But there were very honourable and distinguished opponents who opposed participation from the start and continued to campaign for a negotiated settlement through to the end of the war. We present biographies of some of the leading anti-war activists in Scotland to illustrate their personal views of the war and the outstanding qualities of many of the leading opponents. There were, of course, many whose names are not remembered but who bravely resisted all the pro-war pressures. Some did so for religious reasons, some because they opposed workers killing each other for what they believed was the advantage of their ruling class, some because they regarded the war as a disaster with no positive outcomes.

## **Keir Hardie**

Keir Hardie is regarded as the main founder of the Labour Party. Under his leadership it became a significant force in the House of Commons. Yet in 1915 he died depressed that his efforts to avoid war had failed. Hardie was born in poverty in 1856 and started work at eight. He was sacked as a coal miner because of his trade union activities. He stood as a candidate at a by-election in Mid-Lanark in 1888 but, while he did not win, he went on to take a leading role in forming the Scottish Labour Party. He defeated a Tory MP to win a seat in London and in 1900 he won a Welsh seat. In 1906 he was joined in the Commons by 28 other Labour MPs and they chose Hardie as their leader. In 1899 he strongly opposed Britain's part in the Boer War which he saw as a war to protect the trade interests of the powerful. It was a war in which 20,000 women and children died in British concentration camps. He visited India and South Africa and spoke out against the colonialism and racism there.

In 1910 in Copenhagen, he called on all workers to refuse to fight if a war was started as looked increasingly possible. He explained why war was likely. The British Government was determined to maintain control over its massive empire to protect its economic advantages. Germany's aim of gaining an empire of its own set both states into an arms race which arms dealers saw as an opportunity for massive financial gain. He was dismayed when most Labour MPs at the start of the war caved in to the war hysteria. Ramsay Macdonald, who was leader in 1914, resigned and joined Keir Hardie in opposition to the war and they suffered great abuse as a result. He died in Cumnock in 1915 after a stroke, heartbroken by the war. In his last article he expressed his hope that after the war democracy would "break the rule of those to whom imperialism and militarism mean wealth and power".

## **Crystal Macmillan**

Crystal Macmillan was born in 1872 into a prosperous Edinburgh family. She was the first woman to graduate with a science degree from Edinburgh University and she later qualified as a barrister. She was a leading figure in the suffrage movement and she attracted international interest as the first woman to argue a case before the bar of the House of Lords when she challenged the legality of interpreting the word 'persons' in legislation as meaning only males. Although this failed, it was a significant contribution to the suffrage cause. With the start of war, her energies were focussed on the anti-war movement, particularly building on the international links the suffrage movement had established. She was a key organiser of the Women's Peace Congress at The Hague in April 1915 when 1,200 women from across Europe and the US produced proposals for a negotiated settlement to the war. One hundred and eighty women from the UK had signed up to go but the Government refused most of them travel visas and then closed the Channel to all transport to coincide with the Congress. This was an indication of the potential effectiveness with which the women's campaign was viewed by the authorities. Crystal was already on the continent working with refugees and so was able to attend. She was appointed as one of the delegation to visit the heads of neutral countries to try to persuade them to initiate peace negotiations. She met with the US President and the Norwegian King. While this did not succeed, some of the women's peace proposals were used by President Wilson in the founding of the League of Nations after the war. There was a second International Congress in 1919 just before the Treaty of Versailles was due to be signed to which Crystal was a delegate.. The Congress strongly condemned the harsh surrender terms planned for Germany and made representations on this but the combination of revenge and greed won the day and consequently helped to create the conditions for the rise of Hitler.

## **John Maclean**

John Maclean was born in 1879. His father was from Mull and had been forced by the Clearances to move to the city. John was brought up with a Free Church background but he later rejected what he saw as the hypocrisy of organised religion. His Highland background influenced his strong opposition to landlord interests. His mother was widowed when he was eight and she struggled to support the family and to enable him to train as a teacher and then to complete a part-time degree at Glasgow University. Maclean was very highly regarded by those who knew him as a very moral, humane, serious and generous man.

His first political activity was to join the Pollokshaws Progressive Union which campaigned for social reform. He also became active in the Cooperative Society. In 1905 he was appointed by the Social Democratic Federation as lecturer in economics and his lectures became very popular. Twice a week he spoke to groups all over Glasgow and Lanarkshire, introducing thousands of workers to socialist economics and a critique of the system under which so many of them were living in poverty. In 1908 he organised a demonstration of the unemployed who marched through the Glasgow Stock Exchange. He helped organise a successful strike of women mill workers in 1910 and a year later a strike at the Singer Sewing Machine plant. He believed that a socialist revolution could be brought about through working class education.

As a passionate opponent of the war Maclean was involved in the first demonstration on 9 August 1914 on Glasgow Green organised by the Peace Society and socialist groups. He said "This war has been brought about by the intrigues of the capitalist and landlord interests of all countries involved and the workers of the world will obtain no advantages out of the war". In 1915 he was arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act and he was sacked from his teaching job. He was imprisoned but released in 1917 after large demonstrations on his behalf. In 1918 he was again arrested on the basis of things he had said at meetings. At his trial he said: " I had a lecture, the principal headings of which were 'Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill'... No human being on the face of the earth, no government is going to take from me my right to speak, my right to protest against wrong, my right to do everything that is for the benefit of mankind... I am a socialist and have been fighting and will fight for an absolute reconstruction of society for the benefit of all... I have squared my conduct with my intellect and if everyone had done so, this war would not have taken place." He was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison where he was force fed. After a campaign to release him, he was freed in December 1918. His prison treatment and his constant work had damaged his health and he died in 1923 just 44. Many thousands lined the streets of Glasgow for his funeral.

## **Jimmy Maxton**

Jimmy Maxton was born into a middle class family in Glasgow in 1885. His father's death when he was sixteen meant that he and his sister had to take jobs as pupil teachers. He later attended Glasgow University and initially was a Conservative supporter but this changed when he attended John Maclean's open-air meetings in Paisley and went on to join a university socialist reading group. He joined the ILP and was a popular public speaker. He became a teacher at Pollokshaws Academy and both he and Maclean were teaching at evening school there. They devised a course on 'Citizenship and the Social Sciences' which was ended by the school board after a complaint. Later as a teacher in Bridgeton he joined the Educational Institute of Scotland and helped form the Glasgow Socialist Teachers' Association, a pressure group for educational reform.

It was the campaign against WW1 that took him from being a Glasgow activist to a national figure in Scotland. He lost his teaching job because of his anti-war stand and his dog was stoned to death by people who had been gripped by pro-war hysteria. He was arrested and charged

with sedition in 1916 because he had spoken at a meeting on Glasgow Green to protest at the deportation of Davie Kirkwood and other leading shop stewards. He urged strike action on their behalf. Along with James McDougall he was sent to the High Court in Edinburgh for trial charged with attempting to 'impede, delay and restrict the production of munitions'. They were given twelve months imprisonment in Calton Jail during which he convinced a group of the warders to form a branch of the Police and Prison Warders Union. After prison he had to appear before the Barrhead Military Tribunal as a Conscientious Objector. He was not prepared to do any work related to the war but agreed to work with a firm of barge-builders supplying neutral countries. While working there, he devoted his energies to supporting the Women's Peace Crusade and to John Wheatley's housing campaign. In the 1918 General Election he stood unsuccessfully as an ILP candidate for Bridgeton but he won the seat in 1922 and held it as a very popular MP until his death in 1946.

## **Mary Barbour**

Mary Barbour was born in 1875 in Kilbarchan. Her father was a carpet weaver and she worked in the same trade. When married she settled in Govan and became active in the Cooperative Guild and then joined the ILP and was involved in the Socialist Sunday School. The war brought more people into the city because of the increase in military-related manufacturing work and the demand for housing gave the landlords an opportunity for big increases in rents. Glasgow Women's Housing Association was formed in 1914 and Mary took the initiative in organising resistance in the Govan area. She organised street committees with the women preventing evictions and hounding sheriff's officers. The Govan example spread to the rest of the city. In March 1915 many thousands of women marched with shipyard and engineering workers through the city to the Sheriff Court and the Government were so concerned that there would be a serious rebellion that they introduced the Rent Restriction Act to stop the rent rises. Mary Barbour's leadership of the campaign was regarded as heroic.

She worked on the rent strike with Agnes Dollan and Helen Crawford and all three went on to found the Women's Peace Crusade in opposition to the war. She was a regular speaker at their rallies on Glasgow Green and at their street meetings. After the war she was elected to Glasgow Council as its first woman councillor, mainly with the support of women voters. She fought for free milk for children, child welfare centres, public baths and a municipal bank. She was also chair of Glasgow's first Family Planning Centre.

## **Arthur Ponsonby**

"When war is declared, truth is the first casualty" was one of Arthur Ponsonby's best known comments. He was Liberal MP for Stirling from an impeccably Establishment background. Born at Windsor castle where his father was private secretary to Queen Victoria, he went on to Eton, Oxford, the Diplomatic Service and then the Foreign Office which he left in 1902 for a career in the Liberal Party. He was private secretary to the Prime Minister, Campbell Bannerman, and when Bannerman died, he won his seat of Stirling Burghs in a by-election. His opposition to the King's visit to Russia to negotiate a military alliance established his reputation as a radical opposed to Liberal imperialism. He campaigned against an increase in defence spending and was a strong critic of his Government's foreign policy. Commenting on the debate on the run-up to the war, he argued that the claim "of leading statesmen in each nation that they did not want war must be placed on a par with the declaration of men who pour paraffin about a house knowing they are continually striking matches and yet assert they do not want a conflagration". He opposed the war and helped to form one of the leading anti-war organisations – the Union of Democratic Control – along with Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Rowntree and George Cadbury. In 1928 he published

*Falsehood in Wartime* which exposed many atrocity stories of WW1 as propaganda lies. His view was that war could be objected to not just on religious, moral, humane or political grounds but also "by its failure to achieve a single desirable object whatever the gigantic cost may be".

He said in *Falsehood in Wartime: Propaganda and Lies of the First World War* - "War is fought in this fog of falsehood... any attempt to doubt or deny even the most fantastic story has to be condemned at once as unpatriotic, if not traitorous. This allows a free field for the rapid spread of lies. If they were only used to deceive the enemy in the game of war it would not be worth troubling about. But as the purpose of most of them is to fan indignation and induce the flower of the country's youth to be ready to make the supreme sacrifice, it becomes a serious matter."

## **Helen Crawford**

Born in Glasgow in 1877, Helen Crawford's family later moved to England but returned to a middle-class area of the city when she was seventeen. She was shocked by the poverty in Glasgow and became increasingly interested in politics. Helen married the Rev Alex Crawford but increasingly she rebelled against established religion because of its discrimination against women. Her speeches, although with a Christian content, increasingly leaned towards a socialist message. She became a militant activist in the suffrage movement and was imprisoned four times during which she went on hunger strike. Her involvement with Glasgow Repertory Theatre and the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy and Gorky strengthened her interest in feminism and socialism and she joined the ILP.

With the start of the war she turned her energies to the anti-war movement and focussed on involving women in the opposition to the war. Helen with her friend Agnes Dollan organised large meetings on Glasgow Green. In 1915 they set up the Glasgow branch of the Women's International League to support the Hague Conference. She, Agnes and Mary Barbour organised a peace conference in 1916 and 200 delegates from sixteen organisations attended. The outcome of this was the Women's Peace Crusade. This moved the anti-war campaign out to women in working-class communities throughout Scotland. We have records of street meetings they held during a three-week period in many parts of Glasgow, in Paisley, Rutherglen, Barrhead, Newton, Cambuslang, Blantyre, Alloa, Cowdenbeath, Drongan, Douglas Water, Lanark and Edinburgh. In 1917 they organised a two-pronged march through Glasgow culminating in a large rally on Glasgow Green. By the end of the war the WPC had over 100 branches. At one of the their demonstrations outside Glasgow City Chambers when the Council refused to see a women's delegation, Helen and Agnes Dollan managed to get into the building and showered the councillors with anti-war leaflets.

She also took a leading role in the 1915 Glasgow Rent Strikes in protest at the attempt by landlords to profiteer from war conditions (see Mary Barbour above). Helen was secretary of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association. Their campaign resulted in the Rent Restriction Act.

## **John Wheatley**

John Wheatley was born in Ireland but came to Scotland as a baby in 1869 when his father came to work in the Lanarkshire coal mines. He had a desperately poor childhood, living in a one room cottage with his parents, seven brothers and sisters and two lodgers and no plumbing. He started work in the pits when he was thirteen and worked underground for twelve years. Despite this he attended evening classes in Glasgow, a round trip of ten miles on foot. He was a very committed Catholic and got work eventually on the Glasgow Observer and then launched a printing company. He wrote and published such pamphlets as 'Mines, Miners and Misery', 'Eight Pound Cottages for Glasgow Citizens', 'Municipal Banking'. His initial political activity was with the

United Irish League which organised support for Irish Home Rule but he joined the ILP in 1907 and founded the Catholic Socialist Society. He was elected as a City councillor for Shettleston.

Wheatley opposed the war from the start and helped form a Glasgow branch of the anti-war Union of Democratic Control. As a councillor he took up the case of the eviction of a wounded soldier's family and used it to publicise the ruthless, exploitative behaviour of landlords during a supposed patriotic war. He was actively involved with the women's rent strike campaign. He also worked closely with the Clyde Workers Committee in their battles to get better working conditions during and after the war. The British Government's brutal suppression of the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1917 and the executions that followed was also something he strongly opposed. James Connolly, one of those executed, had visited Wheatley's home before the war.

As leader of the Labour Group on the City Council, he ensured that there was very vociferous opposition to offering Lloyd George Freedom of the City in 1917. He described it as an insult to the thousands of the city's men killed in an unnecessary war and the families living in terrible poverty unable to afford the rising food prices. By the end of the war he had become a popular figure in Glasgow and very narrowly failed to win the Shettleston parliamentary seat in 1918 but he did win in 1922. He became Minister of Health in the 1924 minority Labour Government and introduced the Housing Act which led to a significant expansion in municipal housing.

## **Edwin Scrymgeour**

There was significant anti-war activity in Dundee and a leading figure in this was Edwin Scrymgeour. He was founder and leader of the Scottish Prohibition Party which was formed in 1901 to promote the Temperance Movement. There was at this period in Scotland a strong relationship between the campaign to stop the use (or at least excessive use) of alcohol and those working for greater equality and better conditions for the working class. Alcohol was seen as impoverishing many families, subjecting them to violence and substituting escapism for the struggle for social reform. Scrymgeour was elected as a city councillor in 1908 and when the war started, he and the party newspaper 'The Scottish Prohibitionist' which had a large circulation, were strong opponents. His opposition was both Christian and social. He opposed the mass killing but also campaigned on the economic consequences of the war. The war had been very good for some large businesses and that was notably so for the jute industry in Dundee. But the workers, many of them women, did not benefit and were worse off because the war had caused higher food prices. Throughout the war he attacked the high profits companies were making. The Prohibitionist produced figures for the cost of the war. It contrasted the £315 million spent every day on the war to what could have been done with the money – 42,000 new homes, 245 public libraries, 49 universities every week were examples given. Scrymgeour held regular weekly open-air meetings in Dundee sometimes getting crowds as high as 5,000. But increasingly he travelled throughout Scotland on an anti-militarism platform arguing that the true patriots were those demanding an end to the war. One of these meetings was in Cathedral Square in Glasgow, another reported 1000 people attending his meeting in Greenock. Edwin Scrymgeour went on to become Member of Parliament for Dundee in 1922, defeating Winston Churchill.

## **Rev James Barr**

James Barr was a minister of the United Free Church in his home county of Ayrshire, then he moved to Glasgow, first as minister in Dennistoun and in 1907 he became minister of St Mary's in Govan. He brought a very strong sense of social commitment to his ministry and was initially a strong Liberal supporter and president of the Scottish Home Rule Association. He published a book on 'Christianity and War' in 1903 just after the Boer War when Britain had introduced

concentration camps for civilians in South Africa resulting in an estimated 45,000 deaths in the camps. In Govan he was closely involved in promoting the interests of the shipyard workers and their families and he was honoured by the boilermakers for his support during their lockout in 1910. He was appointed to the Royal Commission on Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland whose report was a landmark in the campaign to get active state involvement in the provision of decent housing. He was a strong opponent of WW1 although three of his sons fought in the war and one was killed and he was actively involved in the various Glasgow anti-war initiatives. He published a book in 1916 on 'The Conscientious Objector'. After the war he joined the ILP and became MP for Motherwell and became chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party. At Westminster he introduced a Scottish Home Rule Bill and led a parliamentary group against capital punishment.