

Presentation at the Peace History Conference  
Imperial War Museum 28/29 March 2008

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF WILPF IN BRITAIN 1915**

I want to take us back to 1915 and look at the very early stages of the birth of the WILPF in Britain. You will notice that the British committee of the ICWPP used the name Women's International League from 1915 pre-dating the 1919 international resolution proposed by Catherine Marshall that the ICWPP should be known as WILPF.

I would love to be able to share with you all the material I have been able to read about the growth and development of WILPF over the last 93 years but time constraints mean that I can barely share the tip of the iceberg. I don't apologise for giving a lot of detail about the first year and quoting from the First Yearly Report because I think you will be interested to hear the pioneer women in their own words. These words convey, far better than mine, their commitment and their motivation and their clarity of vision for a world free of war.

I will develop my paper through 5 different headings:-

- The British women's attempt to get to The Hague
- The formation of the British Committee of ICWPP
- Activities in the first year
- WIL's response to conscription
- Some highlights from later decades

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Cartoon of women at Tilbury from the Daily Express 28 April 1915 -

“the misguided women who have been trying to reach the Hague for an international chirrup”

180 British women had hoped to travel to The Hague for the International Congress of Women

which gave birth to the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (ICWPP), which from 1919 became known as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). These women already frustrated at the Authorities' refusal to issue passports and the cancellation of those already issued, were devastated when they heard that an Admiralty Order had closed the North Sea to all shipping. So only Chrystal Macmillan and Kathleen Courtney, and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence were able to attend the Congress. Chrystal Macmillan and Kathleen Courtney were already in The Hague working on the Congress preparations and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence travelled direct from America with their delegation of 47 women. Kathleen Courtney managed to send the disappointed women at Tilbury a telegram that the Congress had been an enormous success.<sup>1</sup>

Things moved very quickly; the Congress finished on 1<sup>st</sup> May and on 11 May a conference was arranged at Central Hall (London) to hear reports that attracted women 'from all parts of the country eager to hear the story of The Hague direct from Kathleen Courtney and Jane Addams. All those present were keen for an organisation to be formed; and, on a proposal by Margaret Bondfield, plans for a draft constitution were enthusiastically agreed.' Such was the enthusiasm to spread the news of The Hague Congress that 'two days later, a public meeting [was organised] with a crowded platform, chaired by Helena Swanwick and addressed by Jane Addams and Kathleen Courtney'

To spread the message to a wider audience a record of the Congress entitled *Towards Permanent Peace* was published by the newly formed committee and within the year 2,500 copies had been sold. This report also indicated the eagerness of British women to participate in this new peace

initiative. It included a list of a 155-strong central committee and local committees in Birmingham, Dublin, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle -on -Tyne. An Executive Committee of 19 women had been elected and the first officers were Kathleen Courtney, Chairman, and Chrystal Macmillan, Secretary.

The committee was formally constituted as WIL, the Women's International League, on September 30, 1915 at 'a General Meeting of all who had subscribed for the purpose of furthering the objects of the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace. (ICWPP)'<sup>2</sup>

The Manifesto issued by September 1915 Conference spelt out the women's commitment:-

"We believe that peace is no negative thing; it is not only the condition of all fruitful work, but the result of the most strenuous and adventurous effort of mind and spirit. We dedicate our organisation to the task of encouraging in ourselves and others this ceaseless effort, and of helping to mould institutions in accordance with the vital policy laid down by the International Congress of Women at The Hague, April 1915."<sup>3</sup>

**The [two] original objects :-**

**To demand that International disputes shall in future be settled by some other means than war**

**To claim that women should have a voice in the affairs of the nations.**<sup>4</sup>

were developed into a lengthier statement; listing 9 means to achieving a 'constructive peace' and 3 demands for the emancipation of women – parliamentary franchise, admission to national and international councils and the establishment of their economic independence and legal freedom.

The opening page of the First Yearly Report of WIL clearly states the founding members' mission:-  
“...it was agreed that the British organisation should be formed with the object of linking together two movements felt to be vitally connected: **the Women's Movement and the Pacifist Movement. The first has been recognised as one of the greatest of world movements towards liberation; it is time the second should be recognized as another.**”

Little did the women attending that founding meeting know that the organisation would be still active in 2008. It says a lot for the women who wrote the objects of the organisation back in 1915 that those objects are the principles that inspire the contemporary actions of the organisation.

British women made a major contribution to the international organisation. Following the April Congress at The Hague a small office was set up in Amsterdam and run by a handful of women including Chrystal Macmillan, who had been elected International Secretary at the Congress. A regular newsletter *International* was circulated; the August newsletter requested ‘five women from each national section to become members of the International Committee.’<sup>5</sup> Later in the year WIL chose its representatives; Margaret Bondfield, Kathleen Courtney, Catherine Marshall, Helena Swanwick and Louie Bennett for Ireland.

In New York on 15 October, 1915, the Envoys from the International Congress of Women, Jane Addams, Emily G Balch, Aletta Jacobs, Chrystal Macmillan and Rosika Schwimmer, issued their Manifesto. It explained that ‘Our mission was to place before belligerent and neutral alike the resolutions of the International Congress of Women held at The Hague in April; especially to place before them the definite method of a conference of neutral nations as an agency of continuous

mediation for the settlement of the war.’<sup>6</sup>

In Britain details of the Envoys experience was circulated in the form of a reprint of Jane Addams’ *Account of her interviews with the foreign ministers of Europe*’ given at the Carnegie Hall, New York on 9 July 1915<sup>7</sup>. The pamphlet was produced by the British Section and within the year 15,000 copies had been sold.

In the first year the membership increased to 666 Central members and 1,792 members in Branches across England and also in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Midlothian. WIL had an office, staff and paid organisers. As well as its own work which was focused on propaganda and educational campaigns, WIL affiliated to the National Peace Council and worked with other organisations on committees for Free Trade, Adult Suffrage and Peace Negotiations.

In spite of all the restrictions of the war WIL achieved a lot; its Literature sub-committee produced numerous pamphlets and periodicals and leaflets. It sold 5,500 copies of a leaflet *’Women’s Case against Conscription’*, 2,000 copies of *’Why not Negotiate’* and 5,000 copies of the *Manifesto and Object*.

From February to June 1916 four series of Friday afternoon meetings were held; one series in a private house and three at the Fabian Room, Westminster. The topics included “Shall Women go back home after the War?”, “What has investment of money to do with war and peace?”, “Is it unpatriotic to be pacifist?”, “What has the Woman’s Movement to do with foreign policy?” and “Nationalism, Internationalism, and the Churches.”

I have had to be selective and would have wished to give you an insight into their ceaseless work

for suffrage and for education, and their concerns and campaigns about the topical matters of Free Trade and Ireland. Instead, I have chosen to look at the WIL's campaign against conscription because this arose directly out of the war. Conscription gave rise to conscientious objection and the state's response, which included death and incarceration. It is interesting to note that women were denied the vote because they did not bear arms for their country and men who refused, on grounds of conscience, not to bear arms were deprived of their liberty.

WIL organised, a public meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1915 "To present the Women's Case against Conscription" held in the Portman Rooms in Baker Street. Helena Swanwick was in the chair and the speakers were a formidable line-up. Ethel Barton, Margaret Bonfield, Charlotte Despard, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Catherine Marshall and Maude Royden.

The following resolution was carried:

'This meeting declares that the introduction of any form of industrial or military conscription in Great Britain would be a grave blow to liberty and social progress in this country, and holds, moreover, that, far from contributing to the successful prosecution of the War, it would constitute the greatest victory of German militarism'<sup>8</sup>

Anne Wiltsher in her fascinating account of the international women's peace movement *Most Dangerous Women* notes that 'Pacifists everywhere saw [the proposed introduction of conscription] as the spread of militarism to British shores, the defeat of everything for which Britain was supposedly fighting. They [the pacifists] would resist it, they decided, and in doing so, galvanise the dormant anti-war feeling they believed existed in the British people...In November 1915, the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF) [had been] formed and the principle of conscientious objection, to refuse to kill and to be killed for the state, was established. No other country in the

war... formed such an organisation because conscription in the rest of Europe was accepted as the norm.'<sup>9</sup>

Although the formation of NCF is usually associated with Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway it should be remembered that Lilla Brockway had the original idea and much of the work especially court attendance and prison visiting was done by women.<sup>10</sup> Catherine Marshall attended the first convention of the NCF as a WIL delegate and gradually her energies went into the pressing work of the NCF and she took over Clifford Allen's work as Secretary when he was imprisoned.

WIL held a conference and two general meetings in early 1916. The 3<sup>rd</sup> February meeting considered '...the attitude of the League towards The Military Service Bill, the Basis of the Franchise and recent and impending legislation'.<sup>11</sup> The League's position on conscription<sup>12</sup> was made clear in the resolution:

'That WIL holds that Conscription introduces militarism in its most pernicious form, endangers industrial liberty, and is the gravest infringement of the rights of conscience and of the liberty of the subject....and it resolves to work in every legal way possible for the repeal and against the extension of the Military Services Act'. The resolution was sent to Mr. Asquith, Sir John Simon, Philip Snowden, the press and ICWPP secretaries across the world.

It was decided at the same time to add to WIL's objects "Opposition to Conscription, whether military or industrial". The Military Services Act, February 1916 imposed conscription on all single men aged 18- 41 from 2<sup>nd</sup> March.

WIL organised a three day conference 10 -12 April, 1916, at the Essex Hall on the “The Terms of a European Settlement”. It is interesting to note the number of prominent men who spoke at this conference, Henry Nevinston, Mr Pethick Lawrence, Mr. Brailsford, Bertrand Russell and Leonard Woolf. The women speakers were Miss Czaplicka and Miss Cooper Willis. The stimulus for this discussion was ‘the newspaper report of what the American Envoy, Colonel House, declared to be terms upon which Germany would be willing to negotiate.’<sup>13</sup>

At the WIL Council meeting, following the Conference, held on 13 April, 1916, a further resolution was passed. This declared that WIL’s hostility to conscription had been justified and confirmed by the administration of the Military Service Act which ‘...by its flouting of conscience and of civil authority, this administration has proved the deeply corrupting effect of the power to conscript men’ and urged ‘Mr Asquith to resist every proposal for the extension or perpetuation of [conscription].’ Conscription was in fact extended and the numbers of conscientious objects grew. In the week ending 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1916 there were 2,426 COs in the hands of the military authorities.<sup>14</sup>

The processing and treatment of COs was also a concern of WIL and the Executive meeting on 18 May, 1916 forwarded to the Government a resolution ‘strongly [urging] that men who have claimed exemption from military service on conscientious grounds, and have been refused, should not be deemed to be soldiers, but should be left in the hands of the Civil Authority.’

In a reflective tone the report on Conscription ends ‘Conscription is a hideous institution now riveted on what once were free men. The War is in its third year, and the expressions of unreasoning and foolish hatred now printed and spoken are such as would, in August 1914, have horrified those who utter them...We stand for a tendency; we stand for a principle; we stand for an

educative work that will not be accomplished in our time or in that of our children's children. Those of us who hold the faith can do no other than work in it and for it...Have we no strength, no comfort, in these dark days in the knowledge that, when it was most unpopular, a handful of British women were ready to declare the rooted comradeship of all, of whatever nationality, working for freedom and the co-operation of the peoples?'<sup>15</sup>

The current members of WILPF are in effect the children's children carrying on this important work today. From the office in Featherstone Street, WILPF women work in conjunction with sections in 37 other countries to 'bring together women from all over the world who are opposed to war, violence, exploitation and all forms of discrimination and oppression'.<sup>16</sup>

I will end by quickly showing you some images of the highlights of WILPF's activities in the 20s and 30s to whet your appetite for more information.

First The Peacemakers Pilgrimage to Hyde Park in June 1926 .

And a picture from the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva 1932, showing the tea chests full of petitions, WILPF had the petition translated into 18 languages and world wide collected over 6 million signatures. A total of 8 million signatures were collected by women's organisations and presented on 6<sup>th</sup> Feb.<sup>17</sup>

And finally Jane Addams the long time International President on a flyer promoting the only published history of international WILPF "Pioneers for Peace WILPF 1915 -1965 which was published to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Hague International Women's Congress and reprinted in 1980.

<sup>1</sup> Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common*, (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1991) p.105

<sup>2</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 WIL First Yearly Report Oct 1915 - Oct 1916 p.3

<sup>3</sup> BLPES, WILPF/5/8

<sup>4</sup> BLPES, WILPF/15/25

<sup>5</sup> Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, (London, Pandora Press, 1985) p.126

<sup>6</sup> Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace WILPF 1915-1965*, (London: WILPF, 1980 [1965]) p. 22

<sup>7</sup> BLPES, WILPF/5/8

<sup>8</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 First Yearly Report pp. 8-9

<sup>9</sup> Anne Wiltsher pp.141-42

<sup>10</sup>NCF:A Souvenir of its work during the years 1914 -1919, BLPES, P215362

<sup>11</sup> BLPES WILPF/18/14 First Yearly Report p.7

<sup>12</sup> BLPES WILPF/18/14 First Yearly Report pp.17-19

<sup>13</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 p.9

<sup>14</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 p.18

<sup>15</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 p.19

<sup>16</sup> WILPF membership leaflet, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Liddington p.149; Bussey and Tims pp. 95-96 ,p.101



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- <sup>1</sup> Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common*, (Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1991) p.105
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  - <sup>15</sup> BLPES, WILPF/18/14 p.19
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