

# Votes for women

## The Armagh campaign

We take the right to vote for granted these days and indeed a sizeable proportion of the electorate do not even bother to exercise that right. Yet for women in particular getting the vote was a hard won victory and one that should never be forgotten. It was only in 1918 that women were allowed to cast their votes in parliamentary elections and even then they had to be over 30 years old, whereas men of 21 were considered to be sufficiently mature to decide who to choose. It should be remembered too that the fight for the franchise was not just waged by the more notorious high profile suffragettes such as Emily Davison who met her death when she threw herself in front of the king's horse during the Derby in June 1913. Besides those who chose the more militant direct action approach to gain the vote there were many individuals and groups of women who lobbied for years by law-abiding and more conventional means.<sup>1</sup>

One such body was the Armagh Suffrage Society which was formed in the spring of 1912. The driving force behind it would seem to have been an Englishwoman, from Surrey, who married into the local landed gentry. Mary Edith, the second wife of John Garland Cope of Drummilly, Loughgall, had been involved in the women's suffrage movement before she came to live at Drummilly. She had been associated with the Women's Freedom League which was formed in 1907.<sup>2</sup> This body was an offshoot of the Women's Social and Political Union, the organisation set up by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters which gained notoriety for its militancy. Although the Women's Freedom League drew the line at attacking persons or property its members described themselves as 'militant' and some engaged in acts of passive civil disobedience such as chaining themselves to the grille in the ladies gallery at the House of Commons.

Just how active Mrs Cope had been remains a mystery but there is no doubt that she was held in high esteem in Irish suffrage circles. The women's suffrage campaigning paper, *The Irish Citizen*<sup>3</sup> noted that her 'zeal and energy' was a 'great asset to the suffrage cause in Ireland'.<sup>4</sup> In July 1912, just months after the Armagh branch was set up, she was one of the guest speakers at a 'garden' meeting in Killiney.

"Mrs Cope, having just come from London, where she had been 'lobbying' for some time, was able to give the latest news of the parliamentary position, and urged all to redouble their efforts for the cause and to work with enthusiasm", the *Irish Citizen* reported.<sup>5</sup>

Her profile became even higher when, in December 1913, she became a vice-president along with the Marchioness of Downshire and others in the Irish-women's Suffrage Federation which described itself as 'the great non-militant organisation of Ireland', whose work extended 'from Cork to the Causeway, from Dublin to Galway' and whose membership included 'Nationalists and Unionists, Orangemen and Sinn Feiners'.<sup>6</sup> Its campaign was concentrated upon trying to get 'as many resolutions in favour of women's suffrage from public meetings, parliamentary candidates and public bodies as possible' and in ensuring that none of its affiliated bodies

by Mary McVeigh

supported any parliamentary candidate until a 'solution' was gained.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, when the Federation established a Northern Committee in February 1913 to bring together the various suffrage bodies under the one umbrella and to make the interchange of speakers and organisers easier, the Armagh group opted not to join up but remain 'working directly with the Central Committee in Dublin'.<sup>8</sup> Although Mrs Cope pointed this out in the *Irish Citizen* she gave no explanation as to why the decision had been made or why she felt the need to make it public. The reason for not joining up could well have been that her links with the Dublin leadership were so well established that she did not see the



need to belong to an intermediary body. However, it is not easy to see why she needed to make a public statement on the decision, perhaps internal politics were at the root?

She was unable to attend a 'mass meet-

# VOTES FOR WOMEN.

**Antient Concert Rooms,**

**SATURDAY, 1st JUNE, at 8 p.m.**

**A**

# **MASS MEETING**

**OF**

**IRISH SUFFRAGISTS**

to Demand the Passing of a

**Woman Suffrage Amendment**

to the Home Rule Bill.

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**Addresses by Irish Women Representing  
the Suffrage Societies of all the Provinces.**

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**Admission, - 1s. & 6d.**

ing' held in Dublin in June the previous year to demand the inclusion of female suffrage in the Home Rule Bill. Nonetheless her voice was heard because she was one of a number of people including James Connolly, the Labour leader, authors St. John Irvine and George Russell (AE) and Vida Goldstein, President of the Women's Political Association, Melbourne who sent messages of support which were duly published.

"I write from the purely Unionist point of view. But it seems imperative that all women, of whatever political party, should now stand for a great principle – the principle that no democratic Government can be considered complete which ignores not only a class but a whole sex. It is because I know we are one in standing for this that I would have gladly joined you on your platform tonight", she declared.<sup>9</sup>

It could be said that she took a courageous stand in speaking out at that time, as Home Rule was a sensitive and divisive issue, but for Edith Cope getting the vote took precedent over party loyalty or any other political considerations and she likely subscribed to the optimistic belief which women's historian Diane Urquhart said prevailed about the meeting. It was seen to 'represent a new spirit amongst Irish women that would overcome both political and geographical divisions'.<sup>10</sup>

The following year she was equally forthright and focussed when she wrote to the Irish Citizen: "*I feel the eyes of even many suffragists have still to be opened to the value set on the work they so generously do for their different Parties and to their real position, or want of position, in their Parties, and before such a policy can be adopted. When that eye-opening has taken place – as most assuredly sooner or later it must – and they realise that no Party and no Government is worthy of their support which by its actions appears to consider them unfit for the responsibility of a single vote, we may be able to adopt a more powerful policy than seems at present possible*".<sup>11</sup>

When the Armagh Suffrage Society held a big meeting in the City Hall in September 1912 Mrs Cope again clearly nailed her colours to the mast, so to speak, on the suffrage issue. She stressed to apparently great applause, that the

society was strictly non-party and that those who belonged to it 'were out for a great principle'. It was that anywhere there was a democracy, every section of it, men and women, should have representation. She said they had been told that their meeting should be postponed for a year until the political agitation in progress was lower. It was their belief however, if they waited until the 'political difficulties in regard to Ireland' were over, it would be a very long time before they saw the attainment of the objects for which they were fighting. They meant to pay no heed to such advice. The passing moment was theirs and let them make use of its opportunities, she pleaded.

Mrs Cope emphasised that her society was non-militant but added that she thought that a great deal of the militancy of some of the suffragettes they read about was vastly exaggerated. For instance, it was inferred that the weapon thrown at the leader of the Nationalist party in Dublin was an ordinary hatchet, which would have been 'dreadful', whereas it was, in fact, only a toy hammer used for breaking toffee.

This meeting would seem to have been the only occasion when the Armagh Suffrage Society received attention from the local press. Both the Armagh Guardian and the Ulster Gazette gave full reports of the event.<sup>12</sup> The editor of the Armagh Guardian, however, took exception to comments made by both Mrs Cope and the guest speaker, Charlotte Despard:

"Mrs Cope confidently told her audience at the Armagh Suffrage meeting that they were going to refute the erroneous idea that no society could be run in Ireland without the introduction of politics. Unfortunately for the accuracy of the remark Mrs Despard, who followed, very soon referred to political matters, by taking it for granted that we were to have Home Rule in Ireland, and urged that advantage should be taken of the change to secure women's suffrage. The result of this unhappy reference to a subject which is now being fiercely fought by each political party is that Mrs Despard is now naturally described as a Home Ruler, and her association with the local society necessarily means a danger to Unionists,

who cannot therefore conscientiously support it".

Needless to say Mrs Cope was not prepared to let this criticism go unanswered and in the following week's paper she strongly refuted that any political opinions had been advanced by the guest speaker. She wrote: "I have a most distinct understanding with any-one who comes on our platform or joins our society that politics will not be touched upon or interfered with in any way".<sup>13</sup>

What Charlotte Despard actually said was that it would be so much better for their sisters in Great Britain if women secured the vote in 'whatever change was coming in Ireland'. It would seem that her voice was so low that it was not always possible to hear her but obviously the reporter did not miss this offending remark or indeed very much of her speech since it was given considerable coverage.

She did not confine herself to the suffrage campaign but gave what were certainly advanced and radical views on a variety of women's issues which must have caused some ripples in the audience which was largely if not exclusively made up of the higher echelons of Armagh society. Although it was reported that all creeds and classes were included only those with some social standing such as the Hons. Ethel and Ann McNaughten, the Robinsons of Dartry Lodge, Miss Blanche Hart-Synott of Ballymoyer and the Wilsons of Hockley were named. Indeed it must be said that the fight for the vote was one fought primarily from drawing rooms and the majority of those involved were drawn from the middle and upper classes and not all of them would have been in favour of universal suffrage. Some would have been of the view that the working class, men and women, were there to be governed, not to govern.

Mrs Despard certainly was not one of these. She spoke about women in the workplace, women and the home and relations between the sexes. She called for 'equal pay for equal work', 'equal hours of employment' and for consideration to be given to working conditions. She recounted an instance

when women replaced men on machines in the manufacturing of motor cars but instead of earning £2 per week like the men they were given only six or seven shillings. One 'terrible' feature of this underpayment was that it drove women to that 'awful underworld which was only known to those who investigated the seamy side of life in large cities', she said. She denounced the Poor Law system which adversely affected women and pointed out that the Insurance Act was particularly unjust to them also. She looked forward to the time when a woman could go out into the world 'as fearlessly as a man' to choose a mate. She added that some people thought her ideas were 'utopian' but they were not and 'strange things' could be accomplished by persistence and, in the end, accepted as necessary.

Obviously Edith Cope was not afraid to court controversy. She had done so in publicly supporting the 'mass meeting' in June and here she was now hosting a meeting where the guest speaker was advocating measures on women's emancipation and economic reform which were certainly far ahead of their time and were likely to raise the hackles rather than the consciousness of a significant section of the Armagh audience. There is no doubt that she would have been well aware of Mrs Despard's beliefs and aspirations from her involvement in the Women's Freedom League. At that time Charlotte Despard who had been a founding member was its President.<sup>14</sup>

Another leading activist invited by Mrs Cope to Armagh a couple of months later was Louie Bennett, the Hon. Secretary of the Irishwomen's Suffrage Federation.<sup>15</sup> There would appear to be no record of this meeting which is unfortunate since she was also a woman of deep convictions and one who was prepared to commit herself wholeheartedly to the causes in which she believed. Louie Bennett was a pacifist who campaigned for world peace at both national and international level and for many years she and her friend, Helen Chevenix, ran the Irish Women Workers' Union.<sup>16</sup>

The last mention of Edith Cope in the *Irish Citizen* was in January 1914 when a

report was given of a speech she made at a meeting held at the Hall of Antiquaries, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin by the Irishwomen's Reform League, one of the bodies affiliated to the Irishwomen's Suffrage Federation.<sup>17</sup>

She was second on the bill, so to speak, following Louie Bennett and, according to the paper she 'delighted her audience with a well-informed speech. She disagreed with any policy that would depend on any political party. The history of the movement – and she urged her hearers to study this history – showed clearly how politicians had always failed, no matter what they promised, to accomplish anything for our cause'. She spoke of the need to study the political aspects of the suffrage question and use the head as well as the heart. In most cases the hearts of women were active and their sympathies were easily aroused but this was not enough. Serious study must follow if their policy was to be effective, she concluded.

By June 1914 Mrs Cope was replaced as Hon. Secretary of the Armagh Franchise Society and she appears to have disappeared from the scene. She did not die at Loughgall because there is no mention of her in the parish records. To date the only reference found relating to her time there were two inspection visits she made to Ballytyrone National School, Loughgall on 13th March, 1913 and 9th July, 1913.<sup>18</sup> Did she leave Ireland and return to England in 1914? She may have returned to spend time with her father, Col. Sir Lonsdale Augustus Hale who died in October 1914. Also, her husband died in England in 1920 so it is reasonable to assume she went back there.

After Mrs Cope's apparent departure in 1914 the Armagh Suffrage Society kept a very low profile and no reference was made to it nor was any comment issued by it when militant suffragettes attempted to set fire to the Pavilion in Lonsdale Street in July 1914. The Women's Social and Political Union had by this time organised in Ulster and were engaged in an arson campaign which targeted the property of prominent unionists. The editor of the *Armagh Guardian* who was never slow to comment on individuals or events

made no reference to local supporters of votes for women on this occasion. He made no connection with the Armagh Suffrage Society to the 'furies' as he termed the women responsible.<sup>19</sup>

There are a number of questions still unanswered about the Armagh Suffrage Society and its founder, Edith Cope. Did she remain active in the campaign after her apparent departure? Did she stay in touch with the Armagh group? How many members did it actually have and how did they conduct their campaigning? How long did they remain in existence? Further research in the relevant Dublin and London archives is undoubtedly required - a project for another time!

#### References

- 1 For information on women's suffrage in Ireland see MURPHY, C. *The women's suffrage movement and Irish society in early twentieth century*, London, 1989 and OWENS, R.C. *Smashing times: history of the Irish women's suffrage movement 1889-1922*, Dublin, 1984
- 2 *Irish Citizen*, 24th Jan., 1914
- 3 For information on this journal see RYAN, L. *Irish feminists and the vote: an anthology of the Irish Citizen newspaper, 1912-1920*, Dublin, 1996
- 4 *Irish Citizen*, 14th Sept., 1912
- 5 *ibid* 3rd Aug., 1912
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 *ibid* 20th Dec., 1913
- 8 *ibid* 22nd Mar., 1913
- 9 *ibid* 15th June, 1913
- 10 URQUHART, D. *Women in Ulster Politics 1890-1940: a history not yet told*, Dublin, 2000
- 11 *Irish Citizen*, 15th Feb., 1913
- 12 *Armagh Guardian*, 20th Sept., 1912; *Ulster Gazette*, 21st Sept., 1912
- 13 *Armagh Guardian*, 27th Sept., 1912
- 14 For more information on Charlotte Despard who eventually came to live in Ireland and became actively involved in Republican politics see LINKLATER, A. *An unhusbanded life*, London, 1980 and MULVIHILL, M. *Charlotte Despard: a biography*, London, 1989
- 15 *Irish Citizen*, 2nd Nov., 1912
- 16 For more information on Louie Bennett see OWENS, R.C. *Louie Bennett*, Cork, 2001
- 17 *Irish Citizen*, 31st Jan., 1914
- 18 **I am very grateful to Jim Jackson, a member of the Armagh History Group, from Loughgall who very kindly checked the graveyard and arranged to have the church records searched for me. He also sought the assistance of Pat Reilly, author of Loughgall: a plantation parish, Armagh, 1996 who allowed him to show me the Daily Report Book of Ballytyrone school which Mrs Cope had signed.**
- 19 *Armagh Guardian*, 17th July, 1914