

## The Many Lives of Mrs Mackworth

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I want you to imagine that it's a summer's day in Caerleon just over a hundred years ago. The foundation stone is being laid for Monmouthshire Training College which would train young male student teachers and eventually became part of the University of South Wales.

It's the afternoon of Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> July 1912 and the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, who is also the MP for North Monmouthshire, has been asked to do the honours. He arrives an hour early. Just outside the gate are Suffragettes selling their newspaper 'Votes for Women'. McKenna has little patience with these angry women who want to take the law into their own hands. They object in particular to his sanctioning of the forcible feeding of suffragette prisoners. He used to believe in extending the vote to women until a couple of years ago when the militants snatched the headlines. He knows he is a target but unlike some cabinet ministers, he doesn't bother to have police protection. Fortunately the ladies and gentlemen gathered to watch him lay the foundation stone seem to appreciate his speech. The ceremony is performed.

But then suddenly a lady in vivid pink who has been sitting in the front row rushes forward and catches hold of McKenna's lapel. She declares that the suffragettes object to the inhumane treatment of women and the way that the Liberal government is seeking to

extend votes to more men but no women. She is immediately seized from behind by Alderman Parry and other dignitaries and thrown backwards down the steps. The whole episode lasts just 30 seconds.

But it attracts nationwide attention and of course the story gets embellished. The London press tells how the Woman in Pink has violently shaken the Home Secretary after coming up behind him and catching hold of his jacket.

Amongst the guests that day was a Mrs Mackworth. Margaret Mackworth was married to Captain Humphrey Mackworth, Master of Hounds and son of Colonel Sir Arthur William Mackworth and Lady Mackworth. Her in-laws lived locally at what is today's Priory Hotel. Sir Arthur had sent his apologies as he was unable to attend the event but Margaret made sure that she attended. She was the only child of Sybil Haig and D.A. Thomas, the immensely wealthy industrialist and had grown up at Llanwern Park close to Newport and now lived in a pleasing new house called Oaklands at Llanhennock, a wedding present from her parents.

But Margaret was no fan of McKenna's despite being the daughter of a prominent Welsh Liberal. She had been a committed suffragette for the last four years and had been converted to women's suffrage just a few weeks before her wedding. One of her mother's suffragette cousins was recuperating at Llanwern after being imprisoned in Holloway Gaol and this prompted Margaret to attend a vast demonstration in London's Hyde Park organised by Mrs Pankhurst's suffragettes. From this point there was no going back and

before long Margaret had become the founding secretary of the Newport branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

From an early At Home in Newport in the spring of 1909 followed by a meeting at the Savoy Hotel in the summer and a 300-strong meeting at Caerleon's Drill Hall in the autumn, Margaret was a stalwart of the society, along with women such as Olive Fontaine, Edith Pilliner Margaret Finlay, Bessie Davies and the Powell family. The paid organisers for the area Annie Kenney, Vera Wentworth, Gabrielle Jeffrey and the Welsh-speaking Rachel Barrett also played a crucial role. Margaret was greatly aided by her mother Sybil as president and the support of Sybil's sister, Charlotte Haig – Aunt Lottie – who paraded the streets of Newport with sandwich boards advertising meetings. Margaret also sold the paper 'Votes for Women' and helped to run Newport's suffrage shop in Stow Hill then at a more central location in Western Mail Chambers in the High Street. A Miss Brown made a banner for the branch, declaring 'How beggarly appear arguments before a defiant deed'. Margaret was secretary of Newport's WSPU for the whole of its existence, until the branch was dissolved with the outbreak of the First World War.

On that summer's day in Caerleon Mrs Mackworth might have looked very respectable but McKenna's assailant was wearing Margaret's best pink silk frock and matching large floppy hat (she never got the hat back). The woman who confronted McKenna was actually a young actress from London and Margaret had arranged for her to be accompanied by a local male sympathiser. She had arrived 'all dolled up' and leaning languidly on his arm.

Just under a month later Margaret wrote to the *Western Mail* to protest about the way the press had reported the event. She pointed out that the suffragette was a frail, fragile little woman who would have had great difficulty shaking McKenna. Neatly turning the tables, Margaret stressed that this woman was still ill in bed suffering from heart strain because of the way she had been seized. Margaret took the opportunity to attack the government's evasion and procrastination and the way that McKenna and other Liberals had behaved.

This was by no means the sole occasion on which McKenna faced hostile suffragettes in Wales or England. Neither was it to be the only time that Caerleon Training College was associated with the suffragettes. Towards the end of the year, as the building neared completion, a fire broke out. Cotton wool saturated with spirits were found in the telephone room though the flames were spotted quickly and extinguished with little damage. The culprit was not discovered but, as was generally the case in these years of heightened militancy, the suffragettes were presumed responsible.

Meanwhile Mrs Mackworth continued to lead the life of a country lady but threw herself more and more into her suffrage work. She was not really leading a double life since she spoke so publicly about the need for the vote. Neither was she the classic suffrage rebel against strict Victorian parents since her mother chaired and spoke at many meetings, funded a number of suffrage events and was even arrested in 1914 in London for being part of an unlawful gathering in Westminster. As for Margaret's father, although he did not condone militancy, he became a vice-president of the national Men's League for

Women's Suffrage and was proud of his wife and daughter's beliefs. A number of prominent suffragettes including Mrs Pankhurst (who gave several talks in Newport in 1910) stayed at Llanwern.

Suffrage militancy escalated in 1912-13. Olive Fontaine who was briefly co-secretary of the Newport WSPU with Margaret was imprisoned in London for a month with hard labour after breaking windows. On her release she told the Newport WSPU that she was 'glad to be out of Holloway, but gladder still that she went'.

Margaret had earlier promised Humphrey that she would NOT go to prison. Yet the political climate had changed by 1913 and she reasoned that she had NOT given an undertaking to be law abiding and there was a chance anyway that she might not get caught. By the summer of 1913 letter boxes had become one of the main targets for attack, not least because they attracted attention but did not threaten life. So she decided to take this form of action.

She travelled to the WSPU headquarters in London to collect her ammunition.

Suffragettes worked with sympathetic pharmacists in devising combustible concoctions.

She travelled home in a crowded third class railway compartment and had a nasty moment when the woman sitting next to her casually lent on the basket containing her incendiary material. Margaret then buried the twelve glass tubes full of chemicals under the blackcurrant bushes at Oaklands.

Her autobiography suggests that her sister suffragettes were not prepared to join in so she took unilateral action. It is difficult to know whether this was the case or whether, given what happened, she wished to absolve them from any hint of complicity. Or perhaps, less generously, she wished retrospectively make her actions seem more heroic for an autobiography. Indeed, Margaret's autobiography *This Was My World*, not written until the early 1930s, fails to mention the women I referred to earlier and the group activities that were so central to the movement. Knowledge of the other Newport supporters, including several sympathetic clergymen, and of the Pontypool and Griffithstown branch only emerges from other sources such as newspaper accounts of local meetings.

Although Margaret was in the highly privileged position of having her own car, she used public transport on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1913. She travelled to Risca Road, Newport and, as she recalled, 'My heart was beating like a steam engine, my throat was dry'. She finally plucked up the courage to remove the corks from the tubes and drop them in a large envelope into the letter-box on the cemetery wall, along with a postcard.

Two sisters who lived opposite had noticed her suspiciously pacing up and down. Being from such a prominent family she was well known even before she had gained notoriety as one of those suffragettes. Soon smoke could be seen from the letter box. It was quickly extinguished and the letters retrieved. The next day as Margaret was travelling by car from Oaklands to a tea party in Llanwern village, she was apprehended by the police then locked in a stinking police cell for four hours before Humphrey arrived and she was released after they both provided £50 bail money.

Her case was heard a few weeks later and Margaret was found guilty and fined £10. She refused to pay this or have others pay for her. She was sentenced to a month in the county gaol at Usk and promptly went on hunger strike. So weak was she by the sixth day that, fearing for her health, she was released under what was known as the Cat and Mouse Act, a recent piece of legislation introduced by none other than McKenna. It avoided the risk of martyrdom by permitting ailing prisoners to be released on licence to recover their health then rearrested without further trial. Margaret was due to return to gaol eight days later. She promptly tore up her licence into little pieces in front of her warders and left, feeling weak, depressed and bruised.

On the day that her licence expired, her fine was paid. Margaret had not sanctioned this. It could have been paid by her father or more likely her husband but it might also have been arranged by McKenna. Recent adverse publicity after several high profile prisoners had been badly treated in prison was currently resulting in a more softly, softly approach to avoid further embarrassment. All in all, Margaret had fared better than many and Usk was not Holloway. Indeed, some took the opportunity to suggest that privilege had once again triumphed. It is, though, worth bearing in mind the fact that five days and nights of hunger-striking was NOT an easy option.

The day after Margaret started her sentence the moderate suffragists of Newport, members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies declared that 'Women's Suffrage does not mean spoiling other People's Property'. And I should point out here

that by far the majority of suffrage supporters in Wales were in fact law-abiding and followed Mrs Fawcett's constitutional approach which privileged argument and peaceful persuasion over the more attention-catching suffragette tactics.

In contrast the Newport WSPU members praised Margaret's action. She continued to run what was one of Wales's most active branches and as her reports to the national paper the *Suffragette* show, they held weekly At Homes, numerous public meetings, Christmas sales and many other events. Margaret was in demand as a speaker across the region. In April 1914 the Bishop of Llandaff received a deputation of 20 suffragettes from south-east Wales protesting against the Cat and Mouse Act. They included Margaret who, on the recent death of her father-in-law, had become Lady Mackworth. She spoke out against forcible feeding as a physical assault. The next month in a House of Lords debate on suffrage the Bishop voted in its favour.

But suffrage was not the only string in Mrs – Lady – Mackworth's bow. Indeed, neither was it her only name. During her long life – and she lived to be seventy-five – Margaret was known by a number of names, lived in different places and chalked up numerous achievements. She could, in a sense, be seen as living a number of different lives. So for the rest of this talk I want to tell you something of the other lives of Monmouthshire's Mrs Mackworth. I'll look briefly at her as wartime administrator, businesswoman, campaigner for equal rights, and as journalist and editor.

Margaret may have challenged the government and forces of law and order in the years leading up to the First World War but the start of the conflict in the summer of 1914 turned the protester into a patriot and for its duration she suspended her protests. She immersed herself in war work. In 1917-18 she held important administrative posts. But before she took up these posts she found herself a victim of war in a dramatic fashion. She was working for her father and in 1915 the two of them underwent the most horrific ordeal after a business trip to the United States. They had arranged to travel home on the ill-fated liner, the *Lusitania*. When it was torpedoed just off the coast of Ireland they almost lost their lives. The tale of how Margaret almost drowned is of the stuff of fiction yet amazingly it did not stop her from taking sea voyages or swimming – quite the opposite – and despite some side effects Lady Mackworth carried on working.

She was made Commissioner of Women's National Service for Wales in 1917 based at the Law Courts in Cardiff but travelled frequently to meetings right across Wales. She recruited women to work on the land and in the new Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (the WAACs). She also wrote patriotic propaganda articles in newspapers urging women to volunteer for work with the WAACs in France in a range of jobs from secretaries to medical orderlies and drivers. The following year she became Chief Controller of women's recruitment within the Ministry of National Service based in London. Her job involved complicated negotiations with the Ministry of Labour and various women's organisations. Margaret also played a part in the transition from war to peace, sitting on the Women's Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction and she was involved in plans for health reform.

1918 saw Margaret begin a new life in many ways. In that year her beloved father died prematurely. He had been made Food Controller – it was he who had been responsible for introducing the nation to food rationing – and the work had taken its toll on his health. He bequeathed to Margaret (with special permission from the monarch) the title he had been awarded for his work so she assumed the title of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscountess Rhondda. She now lived in Chelsea and a few years later would divorce her husband.

Margaret inherited her father's industrial empire. But she was not a novice to industry. Unlike most married women she had been learning the business for some years. It had been her mother's idea for their only child to become D.A. Thomas's personal assistant. She travelled daily to Cambrian Buildings in Cardiff's Mount Stuart Square. The only other females at headquarters were two telephonists. Margaret attended meetings and admitted that she found the negotiation of deals infinitely more interesting than the (quote) 'interminable and somewhat irrelevant conversation' of the drawing room. She filed confidential papers and drafted letters and memoranda. When her father went on his long business trips she took control of his private affairs and acted, as she put it, as a kind of liaison officer for his business. She was paid handsomely: earning £1,000 a year, she was one of Britain's best paid women. As early as 1917 a magazine described her as 'the best known and most capable woman of business in the kingdom'. So the clout that she exercised after her father's death did not come from nowhere. The National Union of Clerks noted that she was 'far superior to the many existent guinea-pig directors'.

Now post-war Margaret controlled coalmines, shipping, insurance, newspapers, printing firms and more, from ventures close to her old home such as the Newport rolling mills of John Lysaght Ltd. to international business from Birmingham to Brazil. As early as 1919 when she was still in her mid-thirties she sat on the boards of 33 companies and chaired a number of them. I've identified 40 companies in which, at some stage in the 1920s Margaret held directorships. Yet as recently as 2011, women occupied a mere 14% of seats on British boards.

So it's all the more amazing that in 1926 Margaret was elected president of the Institute of Directors. She remained president for a decade – longer than any of her male predecessors and has still not had a female successor. She also became one of the first five women admitted to the British Chamber of Commerce. The *New York Tribune* dubbed her 'the foremost woman of business in the British Empire' whilst the *Daily Herald* described her as one of the five most influential individuals in UK big business.

Of course much changed from the latter half of the 1920s with the effects of the General strike and protracted lock-out that followed in Wales as well as the longer term decline in the demand for coal as alternative sources and locations of energy were developed. The global repercussions of the Wall Street Crash and depression had a marked effect on Margaret's finances and business profile though compared to the majority of her contemporaries she remained in a very comfortable position.

When Margaret's father died in 1918 and she became a peeress in her own right (one of a couple of dozen in the kingdom) she found that although immensely powerful and wealthy and even at last permitted to vote in national elections, she still could not take her rightful seat in the House of Lords. All new peers of the realm had to petition the king to receive what was called a Writ of Summons to Parliament. Margaret had duly gone through this process and her case had been referred to the Committee for Privileges of the House of Lords. Her position had looked strong: a few women now sat in the House of Commons and Margaret and her lawyers argued that her claim was covered by the Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act of 1919 which had led to women jurors and generally made provision for women to exercise public functions.

At first the situation seemed promising. Her case was heard in March 1922 and it was decided by a majority of 7 to 1 to grant Margaret the Writ. Since she would be the first woman to sit in the House of Lords this generated a lot of publicity. Newspapers from Argentina to Ceylon reported on the proceedings and one American paper devoted a page and a half to Margaret's success. The *Church Times* called it a remarkable triumph and wondered whether a Lady Archbishop or Lord Chancellor might be next.

But the current Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Birkenhead was having none of this. He was also the presiding officer of the House of Lords as well as head of the Judiciary and he was determined not to see the Upper House invaded by females. He argued that the 1919 Act was intended to remove existing disqualifications and NOT confer rights that had not previously existed. He declared that the Committee should be reconvened and then sat

himself on a considerably enlarged committee which now included hostile individuals such as the erstwhile leader of the anti-suffragists Lord Curzon. Birkenhead got his way and Margaret's claim was now rejected.

She was incandescent. She was not just concerned about her own situation but also well aware of the central role that the Lords played in law-making. Parliamentary democracy and equal rights could only be served if women could sit in both houses. She refused to give up and over the next few decades she pursued her goal via private members' bills introduced by sympathetic men. What became known as Lady Rhondda's bill introduced by Frank Briant a Liberal MP passed its first reading in the Commons with a massive majority in 1924 but met with a very different response in that gentleman's club, the House of Lords. Abortive bills on the subject were introduced almost yearly in a game of snakes and ladders and never quite made it. As late as 1957 the Earl of Glasgow remarked of the Lords: This is about the only place in the Kingdom where men can meet without women. For heaven's sake let's keep it that way'.

Only in the Life Peerages Act of 1958 were women finally created Lords on the same terms as men. But Margaret did not live to see the first four women take their seats. The public announcement of their names was made the day before her funeral. Only in 1963 were hereditary peeresses granted their full rights. Margaret earned the nickname of 'The Persistent Peeress' for her protracted campaign lasting forty years.

Although best remembered in Wales for her involvement in women's suffrage, Margaret became in 1926-8 one of the key players in orchestrating from London the national campaign that finally extended the vote to women under thirty. This hasn't received the attention it deserves. In July 1926 she chaired the committee that organised what proved to be the final mass women's suffrage demonstration as thousands gathered in Hyde Park in support of the vote. It reminded many of the old days pre-war. Mrs Pankhurst (who had just returned from living in France) and Margaret addressed the crowd. There were some novel touches – one woman even flew over them in an aeroplane. The Newport and District Women's Citizen's Association was one of the many organisations represented there. Margaret was president of their national association.

Over the next couple of years Margaret chaired endless committee meetings to maintain pressure and was one of three speakers at a mass rally in Trafalgar Square. Banners flew as in the old days. One of the stone lions sported a placard declaring 'Gentlemen prefer blonds, but blonds prefer the vote'. Rousing songs were sung and 'We Want Votes' to the tune of 'Three Blind Mice'.

When the King opened Parliament in February 1928 – ten years since the vote was first given to women over thirty – a dozen cars, including Margaret's, were driven round Whitehall displaying placards demanding the vote for women over twenty-one. In July the Equal Franchise Act was finally passed. It was Margaret who chaired the Victory luncheon. She was also treasurer of the Pankhurst Memorial Fund since Emmeline Pankhurst had died that summer.

These years saw Margaret spend time, energy and money on promoting equal rights for women both within and beyond the UK. She founded the Women's Industrial Council to protect the rights of women in employment and she worked closely with American feminists and the League of Nations. One of her most successful efforts was in creating an organisation called the Six Point Group in 1921. This was a non-party pressure group designed to give women legal rights to accompany their political rights. Just like the Chartists of the 1830s and 40s, the Six Point Group (SPG) had six demands. It made gender equality paramount, seeking legislation for mothers that would give better protection to children. It was remarkably advanced in its demands for strict laws for child assault and it sought to protect widows with young children and unmarried mothers and their children. The other three demands concerned equal rights for women and men with equal guardianship for married parents, equal pay for teachers and equality of opportunity for civil servants. Margaret called it a 'social betterment' group.

Spearheaded by Margaret who also chaired the SPG, pressure was exerted on government through deputations to prime ministers and MPs as legislation passed through parliament. It held meetings of all sorts – from tea dances and concerts to huge rallies. Margaret's close friend Winifred Holtby and also Vera Brittain were active in its support and first cut their political teeth by speaking in Hyde Park about the SPG. It had some ingenious ways of naming and shaming those who seemed reactionary. Black and White lists were published before elections exposing opponents of what the SPG stood for or alternatively

listing and fêting them as being in favour. A Drab list covered those who had not lived up to their promise. It still sounds like a good idea!

Margaret recognised that, as she put it: ‘Publicity is Power’. And the SPG had on hand the perfect means to advertise its beliefs. This was *Time and Tide*, the weekly paper that Margaret founded and funded from 1920 and from 1926 edited.

*Time and Tide* was Margaret’s own creation and the business she valued above all others. In 1920 she set up the Time and Tide Publishing Company Limited with a pioneering all-female board. It became one of the most innovative, imaginative and adaptable of weeklies ever produced in Britain. And all this was at a time when the press was the main means of media communication. In its early days its journalism and high standards gave newly enfranchised women in particular a voice and a confidence. Yet it was never a paper solely directed at women but was rather aimed at the thinking woman and man. It was from the outset non-party political and covered a wide canvas. And, incidentally, it paid much attention to Welsh affairs than any other London-based paper.

*Time and Tide* began life in Fleet Street but in 1929 reinvented itself in Bloomsbury. This move reflected a shift, now that the vote was won, towards it becoming primarily an impressive and progressive journal of the arts. It still upheld women’s rights but it also reflected and showcased the leading literature of the time. Margaret’s good friend George Bernard Shaw wrote for the paper, as did Virginia Woolf, D.H.Lawrence, Sean O’Casey, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Jack Jones and many others. Members of staff included

Winifred Holtby and later John Betjeman. Margaret wrote not only editorials and the diary but also contributed many 'Notes on the Way' columns, some of which were published in a collected edition in 1937. Her reviews of plays appeared under the pseudonym of Anne Doubleday.

A further move towards international affairs was evident by the 1940s. The paper became a respected commentator on politics at home and abroad. Its championing of freedom of speech was much appreciated. Post war Margaret's personal allegiances shifted as she left behind her earlier left-leaning views and endorsed, in domestic policy at least, support for the conservatives.

Margaret and her paper faced new challenges as modern forms of media, most notably radio and, more recently, television challenged her weekly review. Remarkably the paper survived until not long after her death. But this was at a cost. What remained of her fortune was poured into the paper to keep it afloat. However, it is a tribute to her ability and tenacity that it was still being produced when she died in 1958.

*Time and Tide* had brought together the skills that Margaret Haig Thomas aka Mrs and Lady Mackworth and Lady Rhondda had honed over many years: business acumen, committee know how, good friendships and connections, a journalist's ability to understand Dear Reader and, above all, the determination and endurance to express her belief in equal rights.

