



**Mary Reid Macarthur 1880 – 1921**



## Mary Reid Macarthur 1880 – 1921

“Angel of the Workers”



Mary Macarthur dedicated her life to improving conditions for working women, although she herself came from a relatively privileged background. Her father, John Macarthur, owned a drapery business with several branches in Scotland. She attended Garnethill School with her two sisters, Jean and Christian Stephanie. In 1895 the family moved to Ayr. Mary was 15 years old. The following year she continued her education in Germany, becoming fluent in both French and German.

On her return, she worked as a bookkeeper in one of her father’s drapery shops. She also did some freelance journalism, and in 1901 was asked to cover a Shop Assistants’ Union meeting for a local newspaper. At the time Mary shared her father’s Conservative viewpoint, and was an active member of the Primrose League, a Conservative organisation. She expected to be amused by what she found at the union meeting, but was surprised by the reaction she had to the speakers. Having gone with the intention of writing a skit on the proceedings, she left as a convert to the Labour Movement.

John Turner, secretary of the Shop Assistants’ Union, managed to recruit Mary at that meeting. Within a year she was elected as the Union’s Scottish President, and in 1902 became the first female representative on the Union’s national executive committee. At the age of 23 she was already an outspoken champion of the working classes.

In 1903 Mary moved to London, intending to get a job as a shop assistant. She had written to Margaret Bondfield, assistant secretary of the Shop Assistants’ Union, telling her of her plans. She shared Margaret’s small flat in Gower Street for several weeks, sleeping on a sofa bed. She managed to get a job as a bookkeeper and secretary in Brixton, but Margaret knew that there was a more important job awaiting her. The Women’s Trade Union League (W.T.U.L.) was looking for a new secretary. The W.T.U.L. actively promoted women’s trade unionism. Not a union in itself, it

functioned as a Trade Union Congress (T.U.C.) for unions with women members. The League had been very successful in helping women to help themselves, but was faced with two big challenges, to convince women of the need to carry on with union membership after disputes had been resolved and to raise enough money to run the organisation effectively.

Mary's biographer, Mary Agnes Hamilton wrote, "*If they were not sure at first that they wanted so powerful a blast through their organisation, they were soon conquered both by results and by the sun behind the storm.*" (Hamilton, 1925, p31) In two years 14,000 new members joined the League. Mary succeeded in forming unions in Littleborough, where 200 women hosiery workers had been threatened with wage cuts of fifteen to fifty per cent, in the Midlands among boot and shoe operators, in Paisley among thread girls and in London among tailoresses and telephonists. Gertrude Tuckwell, President of the W.T.U.L said of Mary, "*She acted as if something great was always going to happen and she made an atmosphere in which it usually did.*" (Soldon, 1978, p55)

In 1906 Mary formed the National Federation of Women Workers (N.F.W.W.). Earlier that year, the Dundee jute workers' dispute had failed, because the League was unable to raise the necessary £100 for strike pay. The failure served to highlight the fact that small, scattered and poor groups of women were never going to generate enough money to maintain a union and build a strike fund. Mary's aim was to combine smaller unions into one large, financially-stable, general union. By the end of 1906 the N.F.W.W. had 2,000 members with seventeen branches throughout England and Scotland. Mary was its first President, and later its secretary, whilst also continuing as secretary of the W.T.U.L. Between its formation and eventual amalgamation with the National Union of General Workers (N.U.G.W.) in 1921, the N.F.W.W. did more to establish women trade unionists than any other organisation.

The 'Bundle of Sticks' story, told by Mary, gives a simple outline of her trade union philosophy. "*A trade union is like a bundle of sticks. The workers are bound together and have the strength of unity. No employer can do as he likes with them. They have the power of resistance. They can ask for an advance without fear. A worker who is not in a union is like a single stick. She can easily be broken or bent to the will of her employer. She has not the power to resist a reduction in wages. If she is fined she must pay without complaint. She dare not ask for a 'rise'. If she does, she will be told, 'Your place is outside the gate: there are plenty to take your place.' An employer can do without one worker. He cannot do without all his workers.*" (The Woman Worker, Autumn 1907)

Mary and the National Federation fought battles on two fronts, the first to organise women into unions, the second to campaign for laws fixing minimum rates of pay for women working in the worst sweated trades. Sweating was characterised by low wages, long hours and dangerous and insanitary working conditions. Together with James Joseph Mallon and George and Edward Cadbury, Mary organised the first Sweated Industries Exhibition in 1906. A founding member of the Anti-sweating League, Mary was called before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, set up in 1907 to enquire into Home Working. It was largely Mary's evidence that at last made its members sit up and listen. In addition to being impressed by the facts she presented, the Committee's impressions were reinforced by Mary's personal

experience. In gathering evidence on the baby linen trade, Mary found herself in one of the worst slums of London, where she found a girl making little lace-trimmed garments for one penny each. The girl had diphtheria; so poor that she had no bedclothes. At night she covered herself with the linen she was working on. Mary caught diphtheria and spent six weeks in hospital. She claimed it was worth it, because it brought home to the Committee the worst consequences of sweating. *“When they saw it as setting death in the folds of a baby’s robe, they shuddered.”* (Hamilton, 1925, p80)

In 1909, the Trades Board Act was passed, due in large part to pressure from Mary, the Anti-sweating League and the N.F.W.W. Chainmaking was the first industry to be dealt with under the Act, and a minimum wage was set. For six months, however, workers were allowed to contract out of the new rates. Certain employers took advantage of the delay. They demanded that the women put their marks on agreements to accept lower pay, or tricked them into doing so. Mary predicted that, if women worked for six months outside the new rates, employers would stockpile chain and dismiss workers once the minimum wage became law, giving the impression that the first effect of the new Act was to create unemployment.

Mary knew that the Chain Trade Board was being treated as a test case. If it failed, then the whole campaign to set minimum wages in other sweated industries would also fail. Mary mobilized the good employers, who agreed to pay the new rates if they could be sure that others would not undercut them. The only way to guarantee that was to bring those women offered less than the rate out on strike, many of whom were not in a union and had no claim on union funds. Strike for them could mean starvation.

At that point Mary had no idea where the money was to come from to support them, but managed to convince the women to stand together and fight for what the Trade Board had said they were entitled to. Such was their faith in Mary. It was not misplaced. Mary’s experience as a journalist served her well. Publicity was a weapon she used with great skill. She gave the press detailed notes of all the meetings. *“Journalists were learning to ring up Miss Macarthur if they wanted good copy: Miss Macarthur was constantly writing to the papers if she wanted a point rubbing in.”* (Hamilton, 1925, p48) As well as attracting the support of the whole of the West Midlands’ Conservative press, Mary was able to get the attention of major national newspapers. The Times, whilst quick to point out that it did not often approve of strikes, made an exception in the case of the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath, for their, *“ill clad, destitute appearance evoked universal sympathy.”* (The Times, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1910) Reynolds Newspaper immortalized the women as “The White Slaves of England”.

Mary gave many interviews herself, and arranged for the women strikers to be interviewed and photographed with chain draped around their necks. She organised a deputation of women chainmakers to the Trade Union Congress, following which it pledged its full support and urged every trade union to do the same. The business community made generous donations. Collections were made on the women’s behalf outside churches, chapels, football grounds, factories and Labour Party meetings. Gifts were made in kind, including a collection of old-fashioned jewellery, lace goods

from a lace-maker in Ireland, a van load of bread, and two hams for a tea for the women.

Mary's success in publicizing the strike and its causes was not restricted to Great Britain. An Australian, Mr Bricknell, was amazed to find that the chainmakers were living in accommodation which, in his own country, people would not house their cattle in. A German trade unionist, Herr Fritz Kummer, who had travelled widely in Europe, America, Japan and China, said he had seen nothing as bad as the conditions in Cradley Heath. The dispute also caught the attention of American industrialists, who broke their journey to an International Congress in Lugane, in order to visit Cradley Heath and see the conditions for themselves. When Will Anderson, Chairman of the Independent Labour Party, attended a conference in Copenhagen, he found the women chainmakers the centre of conversation.

Mary also made good use of the power of cinema, which was still in its infancy at that time. A Pathé film of the chainmakers' strike was shown in the principal music-halls in London and in over 500 picture theatres throughout the country. It was seen by an estimated 10 million people. Not surprisingly, donations flooded in. There were sufficient funds to support both union and non-union strikers for the ten weeks it took to settle the dispute. Over £4,000 had been collected. It was Mary who proposed that the money left over after the strike should be used to build a Workers' Institute in Cradley Heath as a lasting tribute to the courage and determination of the women chainmakers.

In 1911, at the age of 31, Mary finally consented to marry Will Anderson. He had proposed in 1903, only to be refused because Mary felt that her work had to come first. The wedding took place on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1911. The couple left for a ten day honeymoon in Paris and Brussels. When they returned Mary launched herself into the general election campaign in support of her husband, who was standing as an Independent Labour candidate. She continued to fight the cause of working women through the Women's Trade Union League and the National Federation of Women Workers. She was instrumental in getting maternity benefit included in an amendment to the 1911 National Health Insurance Act. The one-off payment of 30 shillings made to wives of insured men and to those women who were insured in their own right, was quite revolutionary in that it was paid directly to mothers, including those of illegitimate children. Despite their busy lives, Will and Mary's marriage was a very happy one, although they had their share of tragedy. Mary gave birth to a stillborn baby boy in 1913. It was only with the birth of her daughter, in 1915, that the wounds began to heal.

When war was declared in 1914, Mary continued her efforts on behalf of working women. Unemployment amongst women was already three times as great as that amongst men, and was made worse by the numbers of women who lost their jobs in the luxury trades. Queen Mary established a fund for women, the aim of which was to find employment for those thrown out of work by the war. Mary Macarthur became the Honorary Secretary of the Central Committee for Women's Employment, set up to administer the fund. It established a string of workshops, providing over 9,000 jobs for unemployed women. It was at this time that Mary developed a close working relationship with the Queen.

During the first few months of the war there was great reluctance on the part of employers to take on women in place of men. When compulsory male conscription was introduced, however, restrictions that had denied women access to certain trades were swept aside. Instead of having to fight the prejudice which kept women out of the work place, Mary turned her attention to the appalling conditions under which many of the women worked, and campaigned for equal pay for equal work.

The largest numbers of women, and those most in the public eye, were employed on making munitions. It was extremely hazardous work. Factory explosions, sometimes fatal, were not uncommon. The munitions girls became known as 'canaries', because their hands and faces turned yellow through handling T.N.T. Under the 1915 Munitions Act strikes were forbidden, but Mary recognised that one of the provisions of the Act, which at first appeared to make the women's position worse, could be used to their advantage. The Leaving Certificate Clause made it practically impossible for a worker on any form of munitions work to leave a job, no matter what the conditions or pay. Anyone attempting to leave without the required certificate could be called before a tribunal and punished. Mary's argument was that, under the Munitions Act, the Government, rather than individual companies carried the responsibility for conditions and so, if women were not allowed to leave their employment, then the Government had an obligation to improve their conditions of work.

Mary put this single point to Lloyd George, over and over again. There was no way round it. She stuck to this point with bulldog tenacity. As a result special arbitration tribunals were set up and for the next three years Mary and her colleagues took many cases to them. On one occasion, a tribunal had agreed to increase the wages of 8,000 women workers in Newcastle. Week after week the firm did not receive the authority from the Government to pay the increase. One morning Mary received a telephone call from a furious Winston Churchill, the then Minister of Munitions. He demanded to know why she was allowing the women to stop work. Mary answered that the women had waited patiently for the wages awarded to them three months ago. She had not advised them to stop work, and she would not advise them to begin again, until the firm was instructed to pay the increase along with back-pay. It was a stay-in strike, and the women sat at their machines, knitting socks for soldiers. Within twenty-four hours the firm received authorisation to pay, and work resumed.

The position of working women during the war had been improved through the efforts of Mary Macarthur and people like her, although equal pay for equal work remained an aim rather than a reality. Female trade union membership had increased from 357,000 in 1914 to over a million by 1918.

Mary was a firm believer in universal rather than purely women's suffrage, and she had been careful not to allow the fight for the vote to become confused with her campaigns for better pay and conditions. She was well aware that success depended to a great extent on the support of the male trade unionists and politicians. When, at the end of the war, women aged 30 and over were given the vote, and were allowed, for the first time, to stand for Parliament, Mary saw her next challenge.

Mary was officially adopted as Labour candidate for the Stourbridge area. She was amongst the first sixteen women to stand. All of the women candidates were defeated, but Mary came very close to victory. She came second of three candidates, losing to

the Liberal, the Right Honorable J.W. Wilson, by just 1,333 votes, a remarkable achievement considering the problems she faced. The Bill enabling women to stand for the first time was only passed five weeks before the election, leaving little time in which to get formally adopted or to campaign. The whole idea of women standing for Parliament was new and would have been a difficult idea for the public at large to get used to. Unlike male candidates, there was little or no established campaign organisation to support women. Mary's pacifist views could have contributed to her defeat, but she also had a particular obstacle placed in her way. The Returning Officer for her district would not allow her to go to the polls under the name of Macarthur. On the ballot paper she was obliged to use her married name, which she only used in private, and which was unfamiliar to the people with whom she had worked. Despite the defeat, as usual Mary remained very positive. She sent a telegram to her husband, also defeated in the election. It said, "Cheer up! Better right than top!"

In 1919 Will fell victim to the influenza epidemic. He died on the 25<sup>th</sup> February. Mary never really recovered from the loss, although her work continued unabated. She was active in the campaign to establish the International Labour Organisation (I.L.O), set up as a League of Nations agency in 1919. She was a women's labour adviser at the first I.L.O conference in Washington in the autumn of that year, but Mary's health was already failing. In 1920 she was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and after two unsuccessful operations, died at her home in Golders Green on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1921. She was just 40 years of age. A T.U.C. report of the same year said of Mary, she was "*Great as a leader, great as a friend, she leaves a gap none can fill. Her life will be an inspiration to this congress and to the whole movement.*" (T.U.C. Annual Report, 1921)

Mary had discussed with friends the possibility of establishing a holiday home for working women. Following her death the decision was taken to set up such a home as a fitting tribute to her. "The Gables" in Ongar, Essex opened in 1922. Such was the demand for places that larger premises had to be found. In 1939 a new home opened at Stansted and another opened at Poulton-le-Fylde, Blackpool in 1948. Over the years the homes catered for many hundreds of guests from a wide variety of trades and occupations. In the 1980s the homes were sold. The proceeds were used to set up the Mary Macarthur Holiday Trust in 1991, which offers grants to working women, who could otherwise not afford a holiday. Mary is also commemorated through the Mary Macarthur Educational Trust, which makes grants available to non-graduate women over the age of twenty, whose early education has been limited. Both Trusts are fitting memorials to a woman who came to be known, by those for whom she fought, as "The Angel of the Workers."

## Sources

- "Mary Macarthur: a biographical sketch", Mary Agnes Hamilton, London, 1925.
- "Women in British Trade Unions 1874 – 1976", Norbert C. Soldon, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1978

- “United We Stand: A History of Britain’s Trade Unions”, Alastair J.Reid, Allen Lane, London, 2004
- “Women Workers and the Trade Unions”, Sheila Boston, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1980
- “The Woman Worker”, official monthly newspaper of the N.F.W.W., established 1907