



DAME MARGERY CORBETT-ASHBY DBE LL D 1882-1981

Margery Irene Corbett was born on 19 April 1882. Her father C H Corbett was an enlightened landowner and both her parents were ardent radicals and feminists. 1904 was a significant date in her life, when she accompanied her mother to the International Suffrage Convention in Berlin and resolved to dedicate her efforts to the women's suffrage movement; and from the age of eighteen until her death at ninety nine she remained steadfast to two ideals, the cause of equal opportunities for women and the cause of international understanding.

In her early life, she was treated on an equal footing with her brothers and was dismayed when she found that this was not universally the case. After an education at home she went to Newnham College Cambridge to read classics and became an enthusiastic member of the Political Society. Soon after she came down her father captured the East Grinstead Division for the Liberals and during his campaign she 'won her spurs' as a speaker and organiser. During her life she stood as Liberal candidate no fewer than seven times, invariably in hopeless constituencies.

In 1907 she became secretary to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and editor of its journal. She organised a United Conference of Women's Societies in 1907, was a delegate to the Amsterdam Congress in 1908, was elected to the executive of the Women's Liberal Federation and later to the executive of the NUWSS. She helped organise the Congress in London in 1909 and was a British delegate to the Stockholm Congress in 1911.

Margery married in 1910 Arthur Brian Ashby of the Inner Temple. Their marriage was an ideal one and she did not let the work she was doing for the women's movement disrupt her domestic life. During the war, after the birth of her son, she worked first in a hospital and then on the land — she always thought of herself as a 'country person.'

In 1919 she was sent by the War Office to Cologne where, with Commander Allen, the founder of the Volunteer Women Police, she helped to set up a woman's police force at first in Cologne and later throughout Germany.

The Geneva Congress of 1920 drew up a new Charter of Women's Rights and Margery was recording secretary. She had become a talented speaker, had the gift of languages and was fluent in French, German and English. On one occasion at a Congress she quelled an incipient uprising by making a speech in Italian. When she visited Turkey, she pleased Kemal Ataturk by giving one in Turkish. She was diplomatic, had a good sense of humour, a charming manner and excellent fashion sense.

When Carrie Chapman Catt resigned the leadership of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, Margery Corbett-Ashby was the unanimous choice to succeed her. She remained as president of the Alliance for the next twenty three years. While president she visited thirty seven countries and on her seventy fifth birthday in 1957, she received tributes from all over the world, for there was not a single country she had visited where she had not made friends.

In 1929, together with Mrs Hubback she founded the first Townswomen's Guilds and at the end of the first year there were twenty guilds affiliated to the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. In 1932 NUSEC decided to drop its political stance — now that universal suffrage had been achieved — and develop its programme to concentrate on educating women as citizens. In 1933 the title of the movement was changed to the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds.

At the opening in Westminster Hall in July 1978 of the exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of votes for women, there were three speakers, the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher and Margery Corbett-Ashby.

In her first presidential address to the 10th Congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance she said, 'The Women's Movement exists in every country where civilization is based on justice, peace and liberty. Its goals are equality, international understanding and peace. We work to sweep away those ancient superstitions, customs and laws which hamper women's free development. We work for women's education, free and equal, varied and profound; not only for the education of school and university but for equal opportunity in technical and professional training, in travelling scholarships and in professional posts. Without favour — but without handicap — we ask for equal access to all professions and to all branches of industry with equal pay for equal work.' These words were spoken in the early summer of 1926 and we are still campaigning for those ideals.

In her obituary notice The Times wrote 'Probably no-one has done more for the emancipation of women during the century than Margery Corbett-Ashby ... Much that even in the 1980s is considered advanced thinking, she advocated in the 1920s.'

At her last public appearance on Women's Action Day in November 1980, Dame Margery told delegates 'I am so very old that I have seen an enormous improvement in the status of women in this country. But I must recognise that we can never hope for a victory such as the vote for women because 'Votes for Women' united women of every kind. It was a single, simple demand ... So here I stand to pay deep respect to the women of today, who are working under very much greater difficulties, economic and otherwise, than I have ever had the bad fortune to encounter.'

Mrs Margery Tierney, National Chairman of the TG movement at the time of Dame Margery's death said 'She has given inspiration to hundreds of thousands of women and we in the Townswomen's Guilds have lost a true friend, a great inspiration and a rare member. If her death drives us on to achieve greater things, it will be our best possible memorial to her.'

Margery Corbett-Ashby was created a DBE in 1967 and was an LL D of the University of St Andrews.