

Isabella Ford, 1855- 1924

June Hannam

Letter to Edward Carpenter, August 25 1913

•‘Labour meetings were ‘so splendid I feel comradeship, the real thing, is growing fast, just because of this battle. I never felt anything like it sometimes & it’s growing among our sort of women...I feel like bursting with joy over it at times’.



1913 National union of Women's Suffrage Societies made an electoral pact with the Labour Party


- For Isabella Ford the campaign for the vote was a part of a broader socialist politics
- For her women's rights and improvements in the lives of working class people were inextricably linked
- Shows the importance of emotional engagement in politics – can sustain activists, explain their commitment, sense of personal fulfilment

Structure

- Throughout her life Isabella Ford put together socialism, feminism and peace but the emphasis of her activities changed over time according to the context
- I will look at labour movement/ socialism; suffrage campaigning; peace work which span her life
- I will also be asking in each period what motivated her, the significance of friendship; the importance of emotions
- A difficult route to personal fulfilment- met hostility

A large orange circle on the left side of the slide, partially cut off by the edge.

Sources for her ideas and emotions

- Letters
 - Speeches
 - Pamphlets and articles on varied topics
 - Novels – Miss Blake of Monkshalton (1890), On The Threshold (1895), Mr. Elliott (1901)
 - Short stories
 - Papers of organisations
 - Interviews in newspapers
- 
- A decorative blue dashed line in the bottom right corner, consisting of several curved segments.

Why a biography?

Changes in 1980s women's history

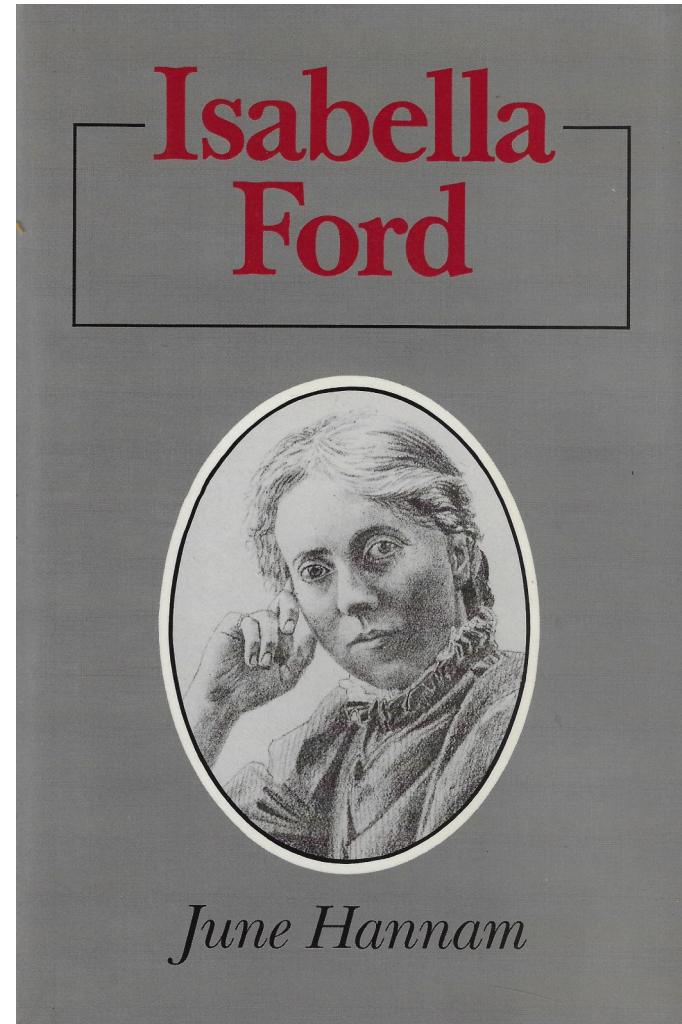
One person's life can show surprising connections between movements and ideas that might seem separate in mainstream histories

Shows diversity and complexity- challenge to generalisations

About one individual but there were a significant number of women from a middle-class background who took a similar route

Web of friendships

Links socialism, feminism and peace-seemed relevant to 1960s/70s politics



Family Influences

1855 Born in Leeds in a Quaker household- youngest of 8 children of Robert Lawson Ford, a solicitor and Hannah, nee Pease

Lived at Adel Grange

Close to sisters Bessie and Emily

Parents radical liberals who welcomed European democrats into their home- Mazzini, Stepniak, Kossuth

Mother 'quietly nourished active rebellion in her daughters' and taught them to 'never laugh at what is new'. JJ Mallon interview with IOF, *Woman Worker* 1908



Encountering New Ideas

Hannah Pease was involved in campaign for higher education of girls, Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and women's suffrage

Friendship with women outside Leeds including Millicent Fawcett and Josephine Butler

1870s - meet Edward Carpenter - lifelong influence. . Carpenter challenges views of masculinity, femininity and sexuality.

Introduced Isabella to works of Walt Whitman - 'democratic spirit'



Edward
Carpenter



Millicent Fawcett

London 1870s and 80s

- Emily attend Slade School of Art. Wrote plays e.g. *Careers*
- Sisters stay in flat in Hyde Park
- Cousin Edward Pease founds Fabian Society- Ford sisters are present at first meeting
- Join Fellowship of the New Life. Isabella and Bessie wanted spiritual change and to live a 'new way of life' but also to link personal change to political reforms.

A new woman

'In her novel *On The Threshold* Isabel Ford gave a racy description of the wild sense of adventure with which she and Bessie and a dozen or so women of like spirit had found themselves in London studying its University courses, and living in chambers or flats, where the smaller the rooms the vaster were the ideals, the barer the boards, the richer were the dreams of freedom for women to train and fit themselves for work of all kinds'.

Katherine Bruce Glasier, 'Isabella O Ford', *Bradford Pioneer*, July 1924



Author photograph from
Millicent Fawcett statue,
Parliament Square

From radical liberalism to socialism

Mother an interest in work of mill girls- friend Emma Paterson, leader of Women's Provident and Protective League, encourages Isabella to organise tailoresses

Leeds Tailoresses' Strike 1889 and Manningham Mills Textile Workers' strike 1891

'I have never felt absolute hunger...but these girls did. We found some of them desperate with hunger and supplied a breakfast of tea and bread and butter every morning'. (*Leeds Weekly Citizen* 1914)

Mallon 'she was well nigh maddened in contemplation of a cruelty that could look without emotion on such extremity of suffering'



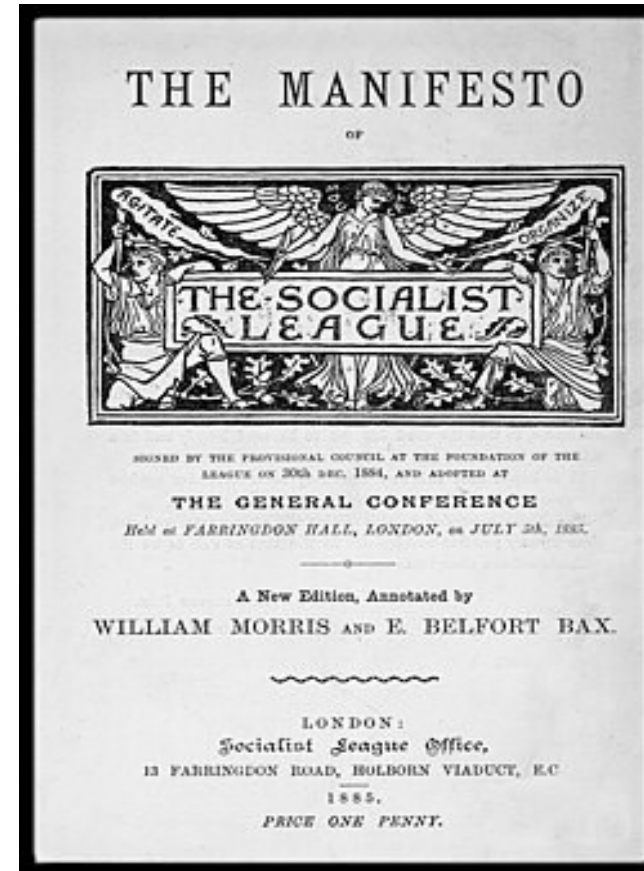
Postcard- June Purvis collection

'New Life' socialism 1880s

During strikes meets Tom Maguire, James Sweeney and other members of the Leeds Socialist League- group set up by William Morris

'new life' socialism - interest in personal relationships, including between men and women; intellectual freedoms and culture, different ways of living as well as economic change

Ford sisters were humanitarian, vegetarian and interested in sustainable/ humane farming methods

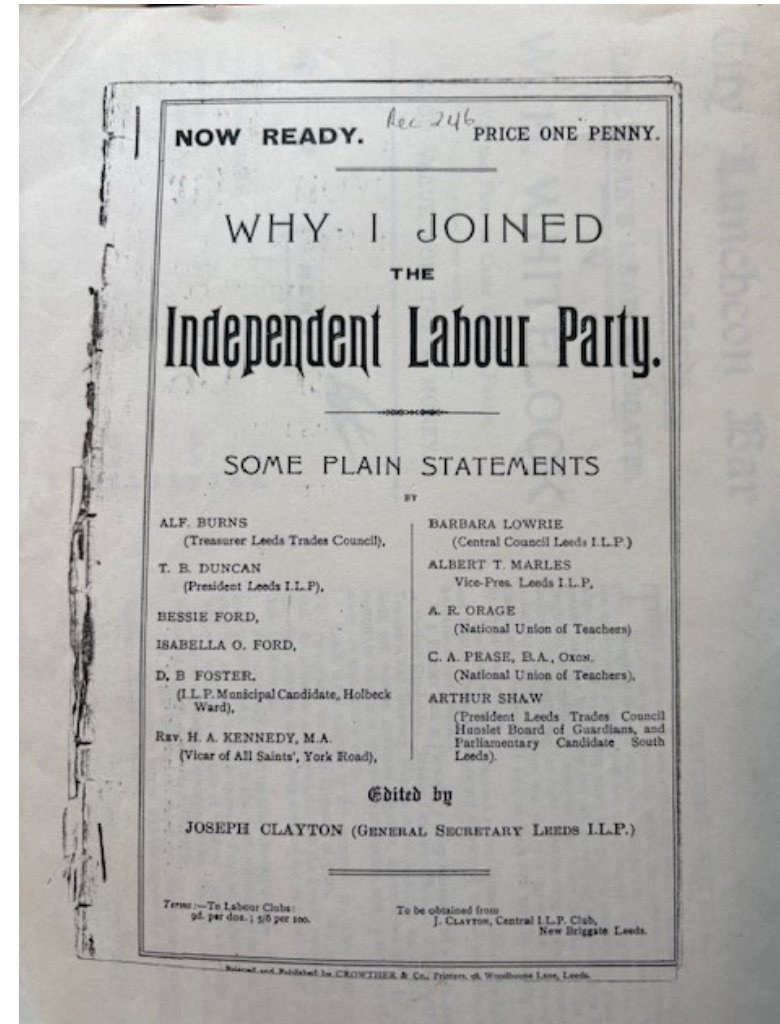


Joins Independent Labour Party 1893

'Gradually I became aware of a stirring and lifting of the gloom. A possibility, even perhaps a probability, seemed growing that women and men should stand together in the industrial world, and even in the political world. I read a manifesto in which adult suffrage was a foremost plank- and in a municipal programme it was declared that women should sit on Town Councils'.

All doubts were removed when, on a visit to Colne Valley she found men were making the tea and serving the women!

Bessie active as well in socialism and suffrage



Activities

- A speaker- inside and outdoors
- Wrote about conditions of women's work and importance of socialism- pamphlets and articles in the press including *Yorkshire Factory Times*; *Women's Trade Union Review*; *Labour Leader*
- National, international as well as local role- elected to National Administrative Council of the ILP 1903-1907
- Attended International Textile Workers' Congress at Roubaix 1897 with Ben Turner, leader of Textile Workers' Union- translating

Friendships with other national ILP leaders and propagandists

Among her close friends
were

Ethel and Phillip
Snowden

Katharine and John
Bruce Glasier

Ben Turner

Katharine Bruce Glasier



Ethel
Snowden

Pamphlet *Women and Socialism* 1904

- Aims to play down potential conflict of interest between working-class men and women and between middle-class women and the labour movement. Denied importance of class war.
- The vote would affect relationships within the home and also improve women's status in the workplace
- Source of women's oppression lay in their subordinate economic position in industry and the home as well as political subjection

Suffrage Activism

- Member of Leeds Women's Suffrage Society 1890s
- Affiliated to National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies from 1897
- 1906 onwards Isabella prioritises suffrage- not the case for Katherine Bruce Glasier and some other socialist women
- Member of Executive Committee of NUWSS
- Active in the West Yorkshire Federation
- Attends International Suffrage Congresses



Demonstration London June 1908-
Frances Balfour and Millicent Fawcett

Friendship with Millicent Fawcett

- Open to new friendships-very close to Millicent Fawcett although different party politics and views on peace
- Invited her to Adel on the death of her brother 'A brother is such a precious person -& we feel deeply for you...sometimes looking back over past years it comes over me with such a rush how much, how very much, I owe to you & Agnes - more than you can ever know- but I know & bless you over & over again'
- Letter 1 February 1914



Effective Campaigner

- Isabella was described as a 'witty' speaker who 'charmed' her audiences. *Common Cause* said she was the 'raciest speaker in the National Union ...the friend of every sweated worker in England...she speaks with equal success to an audience of 5,000 workingmen or 25 clergymen-they laugh and weep as she chooses, and they all love her'. 3 October 1913.
- Use of everyday experience. Working men would not let women down because 'their understanding of us is not founded on mere second hand knowledge gained through reading...for it is their women who are affected by bad economic conditions' CC 19 September 1912

The woman activist

- In all her campaigns she called on women to be bold in taking action for change
- She urged suffragists to 'keep on pestering' and to fight for women's suffrage 'with all our strength'. *Labour Leader* Nov 9 1906
- Women's caring role in the family made them suited to work for socialism but to do this with no 'sickliness of sentiment' they must have political equality to wipe out the view that 'women are naturally more angelic than men, and somehow possess more first-hand knowledge of heaven'. *LL* May 1st 1913

Using humour

- Took part in debates where she took the role of an anti suffragist- at one meeting 'she seemed unable to remember her opponent's name, a misfortune from which I believe some Anti Suffrage great ladies suffer'.
Mary Fielden, 'The Yorkshire caravan' *Common Cause* 5 Aug 1909

Difficulties

- Expressed optimism about social movements she was a part of but could face difficulties when campaigning. She had to face hostile crowds and often found both meetings and some colleagues 'tiresome' - only expressed this in private letters.
- Not easy to link socialism and women's suffrage- she would be positive in justifying the actions of one side to the other in public and played a mediating role.
- In private could be more critical- writing to Selina Cooper in 1908 she was 'grieved' that Philip Snowden had not turned up to support a WS Bill

Suffrage- Labour alliance 1912

- Isabella was one of those working to link the NUWSS with the LP - this finally happened in 1912
- Formation of the Election Fighting Fund to support labour candidates in selected seats
- Others involved who became close friends- Catherine Marshall; Helena Swanwick; Kate Courtney
- Had to work hard to maintain the alliance behind the scenes
- Aim- to work towards a more democratic franchise

Catherine Marshall and Helena Swanwick

Executive of WILPF- Marshall fifth from left in front.



Pro and anti suffrage debate free trade hall Manchester- Swanwick seated far right



Outbreak of war

- Outbreak of First World War- Isabella was committed to anti-militarism and pacifism
- At an NUWSS meeting she 'declaimed against co-operation with government for war purposes with a pugnacity of word and gesture that took everyone's breath away' , *New Leader* 25 July 1924
- 'Mrs Fawcett is our stumbling block. She is not so bad quite as I expected for she and Agnes were most unspeakable during the Boer War....I want to visit branches and address them on Women's work in time of War...I shall resign if Manchester and Newcastle resign....' letter to Catherine Marshall 25 October 1914

Daily Express, 28 April 1915

Peace Activist

Another unpopular cause

NUWSS executive split about attitudes to the war and priorities

Women's Peace Congress at The Hague April 1915

Aims- negotiated peace and speedy end to conflict; non punitive peace treaty; post war structures to prevent future wars

British Women's International League October 1915

ILP and Union of Democratic Control shared these aims



Comment
on the
Peace
Congress,
Leeds
Weekly
Citizen, 28
May 1915

- ‘the conference has proved that international understanding is possible for the future...when the women of all nations have a voice in the affairs of their various governments...this understanding will grow more and more rapidly...as the mothers and educators of the human race the bond that unites us is deeper than the bond which at present unites men.’

Peace propaganda

Spoke at many meetings both indoors and outdoors

Wrote letters to the press and also articles

Could work closely again with some women and men in the ILP who had not prioritised suffrage eg Katherine Bruce Glasier and Margaret Bondfield

Managed to remain friends with Millicent Fawcett despite different views on the war

Labour Leader 30 November 1916



Ideas

The idea of not buying butter from Denmark is...quite horrible to me, as a Suffragist. When we remember that the first International Women's Suffrage Conference held in Europe was held in Denmark and that our colours were formerly red and white, because such are Danish colours, I feel shocked at the notion of boycotting that country's butter'.

Common Cause 22 October 1915

- Sir:- I notice that Mr O'Grady in his interesting article last week, says we must crush Prussian militarism. I entirely agree with his statement. But I wish he would explain clearly how he means to do that. I feel so bewildered-for in the old days when it was preached that those who made a nation great were its thinkers rather than its fighters we used to preach that salvation came from within and not from without. It followed then, I suppose, that a nation, like an individual, must evolve its own righteousness. You will remember Mr Editor that Abraham Lincoln, when asked to shoot deserters refused, saying he had "never noticed that killing a man reformed him". I suppose now that Mr O'Grady wishes us to understand that that reply does not apply to Germans and that, on the contrary, killing them does reform them.
- LWC 2 June 1916

Picture of Isabella Ford at the Leeds Labour Demonstration, 7 May 1915

Leeds Weekly Citizen, 15 Jan 1915

‘I have always been thankful that I had the good sense to be a socialist, and now am more so than ever...in the midst of all this chaos and ruin, of all the nonsense talked about this war ending all war, the ILP and its leaders, Mr Keir Hardie, JR MacDonald, Bruce Glasier and the rest have stood calmly upholding those principles of sense and justice which alone can save us and all humanity. How proud it makes me to remember that for four years I had the honour to be their colleague on the NAC’.



Franchise Bill 1916 and Leeds WSS

- Not easy to arouse women's interest in war time
- 'I have suppressed all my tiresome war opinions & loyally worked with them all, but only about 4 of them turn up at committees & no one will have any meetings- Bandaging and such work have got on their brains...an evil part of my mind wants some of our WS Society in Leeds never to have votes, but to see all the other women having them. '
- 'it is a pleasure to be in communication with you dear Millie once more'
- Letter to Millicent Fawcett nd

Women gain the vote

Letter to Alf Mattison, Leeds socialist, 1 Feb 1918

- And now the great tasks that lie before us, peace, reform and all the rest, will be so much easier to work at. We shall have a weapon in our hands & hitherto we have had none...I find everywhere now- and my peace work is taking me all over the country-that women are awakening wonderfully to their new position'. She did, however, strike a note of caution -'but oh! Will they save us? Will they?' I am glad Edward said we should. Some will but some wont.'
- *It is indeed wonderful when one wakes in the morning to remember that now, at last, one is considered to be a real, complete human being! After thirty years of endeavour to make men understand they were only half the world.* CC 15 Mar 1918

British delegation to 1919 Congress of WILPF, at Zurich



‘Tender hearted Isabella ford flitted from one woman to another, busying herself in particular with the frail and underfed women from the ex-enemy lands, saying here and there the comforting helpful word to lonely souls inclined to half bitterness...Isabella came to me the second morning with her eyes full of tears.

‘Dear Isabella, what is the matter?’ I enquired. She showed me a telegram just received by her German neighbour announcing the death of her only daughter. ‘She is heartbroken’, said my friend. ‘She was an only child. And it was through hunger that the decline set in. She cannot speak to us this morning. And I do not wonder’.

Ethel Snowden, *A Political Pilgrim in Europe*, 1921

Death of Bessie July 1919

- Isabella's emotional and practical support
- Wrote to Edward Carpenter that 'a piece of myself is gone...I keep thinking "I will ask Bessie" or "I will show her this"'. 2 August 1919
- 1922 move to Adel Willows with Emily- less expensive to run
- Not so active in public life but interested in post war Europe and helping to relieve famine- attended international conferences of suffrage (Geneva) and WILPF (Vienna). Was to go to a WILPF congress in Washington but died just before she was due to go



Letter to Millicent Fawcett, 18 March 1924

- ...'I believe that immense lady from S. America- was it the Argentine? A doctor- will be there & she never looked tired. I have often wished at international conferences that foreigners could be really thoroughly exhausted at times. The worst are the new nations which lie around Poland and Russia and all about there. They are never tired in the very least. It was a great mistake to create them!'

Contemporaries and Isabella Ford

Contemporaries recognised her activism- interviews by Ben Turner, YFT, 1 Nov 1889; JJ Mallon, *Woman Worker* 1908; many obituaries

Praised for selflessly helping others less fortunate than herself and for fighting against injustice. Lovable, witty, selfless, broadminded, gentle with a 'keen pity for all suffering creatures' used time and again.

A way to explain the involvement of a middle- class woman in the labour movement

Would she have recognised this idealised view?

- 'She had pity, but she was no weak sentimentalist. She had great courage and a full share of the shrewdness which members of the Society of Friends are said to possess. She was an excellent judge of character and soon detected pretence. Her own straightforwardness made her ill at ease with those who played to the gallery. At times she may have been a little unjust to them.
- James Arnott, Leeds Weekly Citizen, 19 July 1924

Remembering Isabella Ford

Blue plaque on Adel Grange

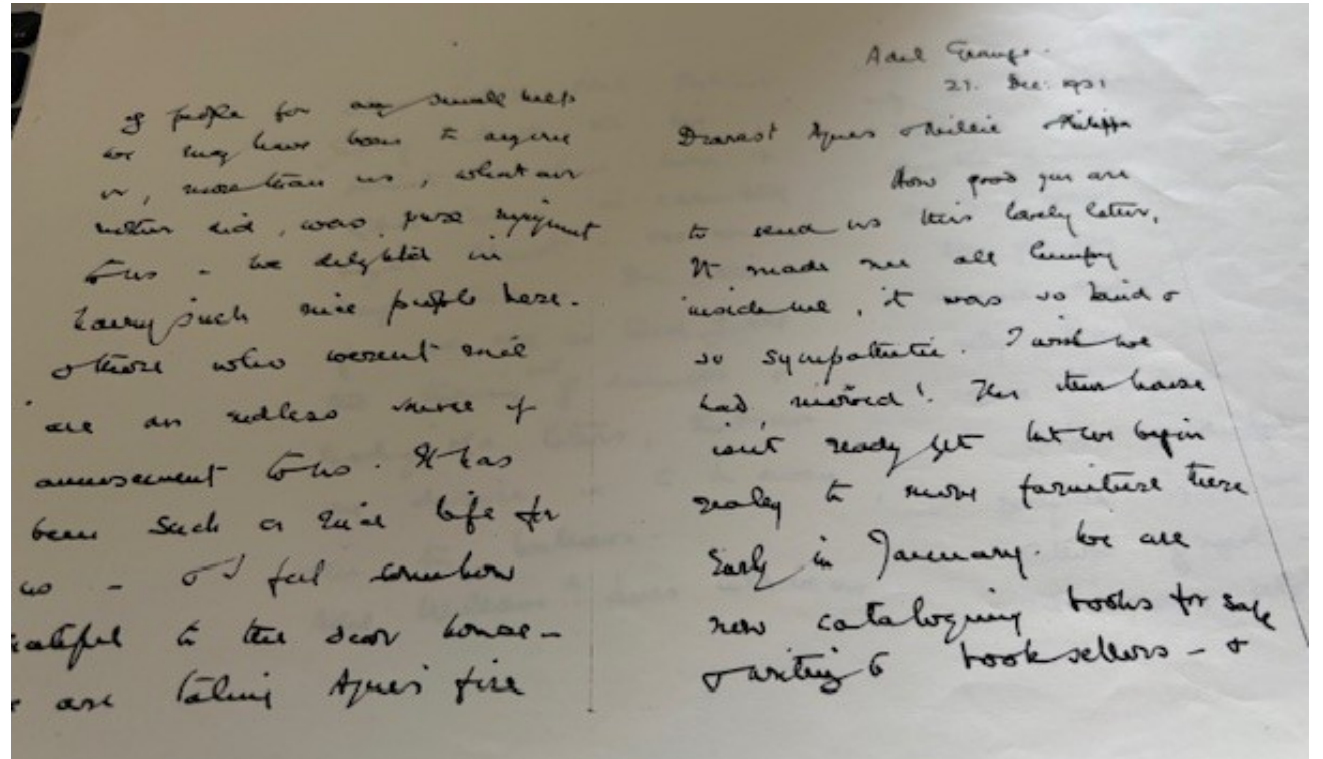


Plinth of Millicent Fawcett Statue, Parliament Square



Letter to Millicent Fawcett, Agnes and Phillippa Fawcett, December 21, 1921

'any small help we may have been to anyone or, more than us, what our mother did, was pure enjoyment to us- we delighted in having such nice people here & those who weren't nice are an endless source of amusement to us. It has been such a nice life for us - I feel somewhat grateful to the dear ladies - we are taking Agnes's fire



Dear Agnes & Phillippa
21. Dec. 1921

How good you are to send us this lovely letter. It made me all comfy inside me, it was so kind & so sympathetic. I wish we had mirrored! The new house isn't ready yet but we begin ready to move furniture there early in January. We are now cataloguing books for sale & writing to book sellers - &