

Frances Melville, OBE (1873 – 1962)

Ambassador of women's education and most senior academic woman in Scotland, suffragist, progressive innovator and leader

Frances Melville was one of 7 children (five boys and two girls) born into a middle class Edinburgh family at a time when women were still considered to be homemakers, wives and mothers, unsuited for the rigours of serious academic study and educated primarily to enhance their social skills. She was also born at just the right time to be one of the first Scottish students to be able to matriculate for a degree at Edinburgh University, following the Scottish Universities Commissioners' Ordinance in February 1892.

She went on to pursue a brilliant academic career as student (MA Hons 1st), tutor at Edinburgh University, lecturer at Cheltenham Ladies College and St Andrew's University, where she had the distinction of being the first woman in Scotland to gain a Bachelor of Divinity degree, and finally in 1909 academic administrator as Mistress of Queen Margaret College for women, unique in Scotland and by happy serendipity part of Glasgow University from 1892. She was to hold this post until her retirement in 1935. In 1927 she was awarded an honorary LLD by Glasgow University, the first Scottish woman graduate to be honoured in this way.

Frances was President of the first Women's Representative Council at Edinburgh University, attended the inaugural meeting of the Women's Debating Society and went on to chair the society in its first year. She also participated in a debate on women's suffrage, an early indication of her future commitment not only to this cause but to women's issues in general throughout her life. In 1906 she was one of five women who pursued a lawsuit to the House of Lords for women graduates to have the right to vote in Scottish University elections. They failed (persons not subject to legal incapacity being interpreted as men only), but went on to stand as an independent candidate, supported by a number of Scottish graduates of all parties, in the 1938 By-Election for the Universities Parliamentary Constituency. She came second with 5618 votes.

Throughout her working life and in retirement Frances was involved in a wide range of committees and associations too numerous to mention here. She set up the St Andrew's Association of University Women, was President (later Hon. Vice President) of the British Federation of University Women, represented Glasgow University on the Glasgow Provincial Committee for the Training of Teachers, Convenor of Queen Margaret Settlement, initiated the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service with Elsie Inglis and was responsible for the War Register of Women Graduates who undertook relief war work in hospitals and munitions factories and on the land. She was a member of the Council of Scottish Justices' and Magistrates' Association and one of the first women in Scotland to be a JP, dealing mainly with cases under the Education and Children's Acts. Concerned about the effects of poverty in Glasgow, she also took an active interest in housing, special and nursery schools and the training of social workers.

Her reserved and sometimes stern demeanour belied the warmth of a woman who cared deeply about all people in need, not just the female population, and who was never afraid to criticise male-dominated institutions. She also had a great sense of fun, reported to have driven her car "*with uncharacteristic abandon*" along the country lanes near her home for Local Defence Volunteers during WW2.

Even after gaining the right to a university education leading to a career, many women still faced difficult decisions due to the difficulties of combining marriage, motherhood and a career. Frances Melville never married and so had the time and freedom to devote herself to championing women's rights throughout her life. Her obituary (*Glasgow Herald*, 8th March 1962) referred to '*the strengths of her indefatigable encouragement and guardianship of women's interests*'. She was awarded an OBE in the 1935 Jubilee Honours List in recognition of this.

Sources

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