

GLHS revives live talks with *Angels of the North*, by Dr Moira Kilkenny

Finally, after 18 months of pandemic restrictions, GLHS was able to host a live talk. An audience of 40 listened to a fine presentation by Dr Moira Kilkenny on the work she and her colleague Joyce Quin have done celebrating women from the North East, whose significant contributions have been neglected in national biographies and collections of lives of the 'great and good'. This neglect, she argued, is partly because, until recently, women have been neglected anyway in such accounts, but also because the North East tends to get overlooked. She reminded us of the dominance of a patriarchal society in our country, right up to the twentieth century, in which women were relegated to the domestic sphere and the role of education was merely to prepare them to be good mothers. Some men even argued that education was bad for women's minds and bodies. Meanwhile, many women were expected to slave away as servants and factory workers with little appreciation. Yet some women challenged this identity and strove against it.

In their search for significant women, Moira and Joyce identified forty people, selected for their bravery, their heroic deeds and/or their innovative contribution. Short biographies of all these are provided in their book *Angels of the North*, published in 2018 (see details at the end). For our talk, Moira selected 10 women with Northumbrian connections. Some of these are already well known, such as Grace Darling, whose rescue of drowning sailors in 1838 got national attention at the time. The story of an ordinary young girl prepared to risk her life in heavy seas seemed so extraordinary, given the ideas of women's capabilities at the time, that she attracted national attention for her heroism. Lady Waterford came from a much higher class. In addition to her philanthropic works, she was a fine artist. Many of us know of her work in the Waterford Hall at Ford, but her paintings found their way into national galleries. Then there was the social reformer, Josephine Butler. Our speaker thought she was the most distinguished social reformer of the nineteenth century. She was born a Grey, and her father was a cousin of the Earl Grey who introduced the social reform legislation of 1832 which began to open up the franchise to many more people (though not to women!). After being devastated by a family tragedy, Josephine turned to social reforming, especially

focusing on the treatment of women prostitutes by authorities trying to reduce sexual diseases among men. She was a powerful speaker and a skilled campaigner despite the hostile reception she often got, and travelled to other countries to promote better treatment for many women thrust into prostitution because they lacked other alternatives. Emily Wilding Davison is also well-known these days in the North East as a leading suffragette campaigner who died trying to pin the suffragette colours onto the Kings Horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913. Our speaker's view is that this was not an intended suicide.

Then we were introduced to several others who are less well known. We were told about Charlie (Charlotte) Marsh, another militant suffragette who went on hunger strike when imprisoned and was force fed. Lady Sybil Grey trained as a nurse in the first world war, converted Howick Hall into a convalescent home, and set up a hospital for wounded soldiers in Petrograd. She also organised the repatriation of nurses from field hospitals in war zones. Mabel Philipson was at one stage of her life a Gaiety Girl, but later become the North East's first woman MP. Dame Irene Ward, also in the twentieth century, became the 'mother of the house' as a longstanding MP. Moira's talk ended with the example of Ida and Louise Cook, two sisters from Sunderland who went to school in Alnwick. They wrote stories for women's magazines and got a contract with Mills and Boon. They made good money out of their writing, which enabled them to travel across Europe. In their travels, they became aware of the increasingly perilous position of Jewish people. They used their money to enable many Jewish families to move to the UK, often acting as intermediaries between people in need and people who could help. They also helped by carrying the possessions of some Jewish families through the various military check points. Just 'ordinary girls', as they saw themselves, their bravery and ingenuity were later honoured by Israel, and, eventually, the British government.

After inspiring us with her accounts of what these women achieved, despite male prejudice, our speaker concluded that Northern women were (and are) capable of great things. And we all agreed!

The book: *Angels of the North: Notable Women of the North East*, by Joyce Quin and Moira Kilkenny, 2018.