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INTRODUCTION

DESPARD PAPERS

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Despard Papers (D2479)

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Summary

c.150 documents and volumes, c.1900-35, comprising the papers of Charlotte Despard (née French), co-founder of the Women's Freedom League, suffragette, pacifist, Irish republican and socialist, 1844-1939. The papers include diaries, correspondence, printed pamphlets, novels and short stories. c.1900-1935.



Background

Born in Kent, the daughter of Captain William French of the Royal Navy, Charlotte came from a Protestant Anglo-Irish background and later married Maximilian Despard, also a Protestant from landowning stock. In 1890 she became a Roman Catholic and is renowned for the active and leading role she played in the suffragette movement in the early twentieth century. In 1906 she was appointed joint honorary secretary of the Women's Social and Political Union in succession to Emily Pankhurst and when this body changed its name to the Women's Freedom League in 1908 she was elected President. She was an effective orator for the suffragette cause and one author has written: 'Mrs Despard, even then a veteran, was another persuasive and eloquent speaker who commanded attention and respect; many who came to scoff left convinced.'

Willing to flout the law for the cause, on the recall of Parliament on 23 October 1906, she demonstrated with a few others in the lobby and was described on this occasion by Emily Pankhurst as a 'sister of General French (later Lord French), then in her 62nd year, but appearing much older, tall and spare, with large ascetic features, wearing sandals and a Spanish lace mantilla on her white hair.' In February 1907, she sentenced to prison for three weeks for leading a march on Parliament and in 1912 was arrested for attempting to hold a protest meeting in Trafalgar Square.



1st World War and charity work

With the onset of the 1st World War she became heavily involved in charity work and one of her first acts was to order 200 pairs of children's boots and a stock of clothing material for the families of men who had gone to serve at the front. Mrs Despard also brought in a large supply of dried milk for those families connected with the Nine Elms Flower Mission where she lived and helped to set up local distress committees.



Irish politics

She came to live in Dublin during the turbulent year of 1916, shared a house with Maud Gonne, and was an active supporter of Sinn Fein. She was on the Executive of the Friends of Soviet Russia, and was a vigorous supporter of Saor Eire, or the Republican Congress, set up by the left wing of the IRA and which had inherited the aims of the defunct Irish Workers' Party to sequester landlords' property and nationalise the banks. Such was her stance that she was banned in the Irish Free State as a subversive. Urging crowds to vote for de Valera at elections, such as in February 1932, she was viewed as an embarrassment to her own side - Desmond Fitzgerald, the Defence Minister, shouted, 'That woman there was on de Valera's platform – a member of the executive of the Friends of Soviet Russia and the Communist Party who seek to establish anarchy on the Russian model in this country in conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church'.

In 1933 her Irish Workers' College in Dublin was wrecked and looted by a Catholic gang and she was lucky to escape with her life. Ironically, in the interests of her personal safety, she moved to live in a loyalist area off the Newtownards Road in Belfast because it was felt that as a sister of a leading British soldier, General French, she would be safe there. She died there in 1939 and was buried at Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.



Diaries

The Despard Papers contain a set of diaries, 1913-26, which reflect the diversity of her interests particularly the suffragette movement, pacifist, Irish republican and socialist causes. Apart from the main themes the diaries cover areas and events such as: meeting with Ghandi in London in 1914; Mrs Despard's journalistic activities; the formation of the League of Nations; penal reform; travels in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, 1913. There is also correspondence, 1928-c.1935, concerning family affairs and her activities in support of socialism. Other items include: printed pamphlets and papers, 1908-35, including copies of 'The Women's Freedom League', 'Women's World Committee against war and fascism', 'The Friends of Soviet Russia', and a hymn sheet for the funeral service of Mrs Pankhurst, 1928; manuscript novels and novelettes together with a number of poems and songs written by Mrs Despard, c.1900.

