

**Name:** Leonora Philipps

**Date of birth:** 1862

**Date of death:** 1915

**Spouse:** John Wynford Philipps

**Child:** Colwyn Erasmus Arnold Philipps

**Child:** Roland Erasmus Philipps

**Parent:** Isidore Gerstenberg

**Parent:** Fanny Alice Gerstenberg (née Bauer)


**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** campaigner for women's rights

**Area of activity:** Activism

**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Leonora Philipps was born on 4 November 1862 to a Jewish family in Camberwell, London. Her father, Isidore Gerstenberg (1821-1876), the son of a schoolteacher from a Russian area of Poland, was the founder and chair of the Council of Foreign Bond-holders; her mother, Fanny Alice (died 1877), was the daughter of Abraham Bauer of Hamburg and London. Leonora was made a ward of Chancery following the death of both her parents within a year of each other when she was only fourteen years old. She was educated at Birkbeck University College and the Slade School of Fine Art, together with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, before her wedding on 14 February 1888 to Middle Temple barrister [John Wynford Philipps](#) (1860-1938), who became member of parliament for mid Lanarkshire later that year. As heir to almost £100,000 by her father, Leonora had a substantial fortune to offer her new husband, who used it to establish a shipping business in partnership with his brother [Owen Cosby Philipps](#), First Baron Kylsant (1863-1937).

Following her experiences as an amateur actress in deprived areas of London when a young girl and as an occasional elocution teacher in clubs for working class women, together with a later visit to the United States, Leonora Philipps was persuaded of the need to fight for equality for women. She joined the Women's Liberal Federation, founded between 1886 and 1888, where she became part of a network of women prominent in the cause for women's suffrage, as testified by her correspondence with Millicent Fawcett (1847-1929), Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle (1845-1921), and Frances Elizabeth Bellenden McFall (née Clarke; 'Sarah Grand'; 1854-1943). Based in London, Philipps's activity and influence spread to all corners of Britain. Her ability as a speaker was key to her contribution. Reports appeared in the Welsh press showing how she encouraged young women to take up public speaking, having been persuaded of the propriety of such activity by her own experience, a trajectory that meant that she 'today stood in the highest rank of speakers on political matters' ([Y Lluern](#) , October 1894). Her speeches addressed employment issues, working conditions, and the need for trade unions, all as they affected women. She also made her mark in print, particularly in the periodical press. When a schism took place within the Women's Liberal Federation in 1891, she sided with the progressive faction, led by Rosalind Howard,

who wished to see the Federation backing the cause for women's suffrage. Philipps expressed her criticism of the women who rejected the cause for suffrage in an article in *The Welsh Review* in [February 1892](#): 'There is something pathetic as well as ludicrous in the sight of women who, out of a deep sense of duty, have determined to be political - and who undertake the arduous and difficult work of organisation and public speaking - and who yet disclaim even the desire for the best instrument of political action, the vote itself', she wrote. Another article published in the same journal, responding to criticism by Elizabeth Orme (1848-1937) of an earlier contribution she had made, further reveals the rift within the Women's Liberal Federation. While Orme criticized the progressive faction within the Federation for promoting a constitutional link with the suffrage cause, arguing instead that the priority should be to win the general election to be held in July of that year, Philipps defended the commitment of the progressive faction to Liberal causes (Home Rule in Ireland, the Disestablishment of the Church in Wales and Scotland, the Temperance movement). The Federation prepared the ground through its support to the suffrage movement, as eminent figures in the Liberal Party had done in the past for other causes, causes which by now were central to the Party's policies. Giving a specific Welsh spin to her argument, Philipps placed the progressive faction's views within the context of the history of Wales and the Welsh people's dogged resistance to their oppressors, portraying them as 'a people, who, in the hour of deepest subjection, when they were crushed and bruised beneath a foreign yoke, were newly kindled to powerful resistance, and were inspirited to thrust back the invaders, by the influence of "Sweet Singers," the Bards' (*The Welsh Review*, [May 1892](#)). The innate Welsh roots of the cause for women's suffrage was presented again in the opening article of the [March 1896](#) edition of *Young Wales*, guest-edited by Leonora and her sister-in-law Elsbeth Philipps. The heroism of Boadicea and the brave priestesses of Anglesey as portrayed by Tacitus were invoked to promote the cause, placing them as models for scores of other women who had shown comparable determination in addressing inequalities both historical and contemporary in fields such as education and public service. In spite of the progress ensured by exceptional women, however, the article maintained 'that there are average women, and on the average woman depends the welfare of the world - just as far as she chooses to support the higher ideal which some more far-seeing sister has uplifted'.

This understanding of the history of Wales and its people, together with the ability to see its relevance to a contemporary situation, displays the depth of Philipps's relationship with Wales by the 1890s. She was prominent in the establishment of branches of the Women's Liberal Federation in towns throughout Wales (Llanelli, Haverfordwest, and Rhyl among them), and the relationship intensified following the election of her husband as member of parliament for Pembrokeshire in 1898. After he was honoured with the title of viscount in 1908, she became known as Lady St David's. She was a keen supporter of the National Eisteddfod, and used her ability and experience as an actress to take part in the National Pageant of Wales at Cardiff in 1909, where she played a central role as a grande dame from the period of Henry VIII in 'one of the most effective and beautiful scenes' of the performance, according to one report (*The Cardiff Times*, [8 October 1910](#)). It was under the name of Lady St Davids that she made her seminal contribution to the formation of the South Wales Nursing Association, a group which aimed to ensure that Welsh-speaking nurses were available to administer to Welsh patients, as explained at an influential meeting in Carmarthen in October 1910. She further displayed her commitment to health issues by mustering support for a Welsh crusade against tuberculosis, a campaign which she founded in memory of Edward VII, and which promoted the capacity of science to heal ('Lady St. Davids' Letter. The Nation's United Effort', *The Cardiff Times*, [8 October 1910](#)).

Within her own family, Philipps made full use of her political capabilities to support her husband's parliamentary campaigns. Following the success of the last of these, for the Pembrokeshire seat, she settled with him at Roch Castle in that county, also keeping a home in London, where she continued to work for the suffrage movement. She and her husband had two sons, Colwyn Erasmus Arnold Philipps and Roland Erasmus Philipps, educated at Eton and the Royal Military Academy, and Winchester and New College, Oxford, respectively.

Leonora Philipps died of breast cancer at 9 Mandeville Place, London, on 30 March 1915, and was buried at Roch. Her bequests reflected her support to institutions close to her heart, among them the South Wales Nursing Association, the Women's Institute, the Pembrokeshire branch of the Red Cross, and the Suffrage Service League, the latter on condition that 'they... [maintain] their policy of pledging members to non-militancy'. Family members were also conspicuous in her thoughts: she secured funding for the United Synagogue to undertake the care of her parents' graves at Willesden, and to the Frenchay Unitarian chapel near Bristol for 'keeping in order' the grave of her brother, Arnold Gerstenberg (1863-1887). She had become responsible, following the latter's death, aged twenty-three, for administering his Fund 'for the promotion of the study of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics among students (men and women alike) of Natural Sciences'. To her sons, she bequeathed more than £35,000 together with her letters, her own papers, and the family papers, 'to be preserved for future generations in the hope that they may become of interest to posterity'. Even though they were present at her funeral, it was not possible for her wishes for her two sons to be realized: the elder died on 13 May 1915 and his brother on 7 July 1916, both serving the British army in France.

## Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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## Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Leonora Philipps](#)

## Archives

NLW Archives: [NLW MS 21971B: Letters to Nora Philipps. \[c.1888\]-1893](#)

London University: London School of Economics, The Women's Library, 2LSW/E/07/160: Lady St Davids to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 28 August 1913

## Additional Links

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