

THODAY, MARY GLADYS (née Sykes) (1884 - 1943), scientist, suffragist, peace-campaigner

Name: Mary Gladys Thoday
Date of birth: 1884
Date of death: 1943
Spouse: David Thoday
Child: David Robert Gabriel Thoday
Child: Peter Murray Thoday
Child: John Marion Thoday
Child: Michael George Thoday
Parent: John Thorley Sykes
Parent: Mary Louisa Sykes (née March)
Gender: Female
Occupation: scientist, suffragist, peace-campaigner
Area of activity: Science and Mathematics; Activism

Gladys Thoday was born on 13 March 1884 in Chester, the first child of John Thorley Sykes (1852-1908), a cotton broker, and his wife Mary Louisa (née March, 1856-1951). She had one sister, Olive Thorley Sykes (1886-1933). The family later moved to the Sykes family home at Croes Howell near Gresford in Denbighshire.

She was educated at the Queen's School, Chester, before going up at the age of eighteen to Girton College, Cambridge, where she gained a first class pass in both parts of the Natural Science Tripos, and went on to do research in botany as a Bathurst student and a research fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge. She was a member of the prestigious Marshall Ward Society at the University where women were given the opportunity to present papers and take part in free discussion. A fellow member of the Society was [David Thoday](#) (1883-1964), also a botanist, whom Gladys married at Gresford Church in 1910. They had four sons, David Robert Gabriel Thoday, known as Robin (1911-1983); Peter Murray Thoday (1913-1999); John Marion Thoday (1916-2008), Balfour Professor of Genetics at Cambridge University 1959-1983, and Michael George Thoday (1920-1989).

Before and after her marriage she was a prolific writer of scientific papers, both single-authored and in collaboration with others. When her husband accepted a lecturing post at Manchester University in 1911, she was appointed an Honorary Research Fellow there, working in the field of Phanerogamic botany and contributing to the research programme of the department as well as the teaching.

Gladys Thoday was a member of the National Society of Women's Suffrage Societies and, for four years, served as the honorary secretary of the Manchester District Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies. It was a passion she carried with her to South Africa when her husband accepted a chair at Cape Town University in 1918. Within two years she was appointed vice-president of the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union of South Africa and twice directly addressed Jan Smuts, the Prime Minister, on the question of female suffrage. While in South Africa Thoday continued her own botanical research, and she completed (at the request of Prof. A. C. Seward of Cambridge University) the unfinished work on Gnetales of the late Prof. H. H. W. Pearson, founder of the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. Her concern for the future wellbeing of South Africa and its inhabitants would always be ongoing and, even after moving back to Britain, she continued to be engaged with the plight and education of the native African population, the demands for the vote, as well as concerns over female genital mutilation.

In 1923 Gladys and her family returned to Britain when her husband accepted the chair in botany at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where she was soon appointed an honorary lecturer. It was while living in Bangor that she became deeply involved with the cause for peace. In the summer of 1926, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom ('WILPF') organised a Peace Pilgrimage in which women from various parts of Britain journeyed to a rally in Hyde Park in London. The north Wales contingent was led by Gladys Thoday, together with Charlotte Price White and Mary Silyn Roberts, and Gladys was one of the speakers who addressed the crowd. The North Wales Women's Peace Council was established in the aftermath of the Peace Pilgrimage. Gladys was, from the outset, its Honorary Secretary, a role she held until her death. A prolific letter writer, she challenged individuals, organisations, politicians and even international heads of state, as she strove to keep the cause of disarmament at the forefront of public consciousness.

Gladys Thoday was a member of numerous pacifist and anti-war organisations. As well as being the Honorary Secretary of the North Wales Peace Council and an Executive Member of the British Women's Peace Crusade, she was also a member of the General Council of the British League of Nations, a member of the Welsh National Council of the League of Nations Union and a member of the Women's Advisory Council of the League of Nations. To this list had been added, by 1936,

membership of the Peace Committee of the National Council of Women and the National Executive of the Council of Action. Her involvement with these organisations was never nominal. She faithfully attended their meetings before painstakingly reporting on the proceedings to groups and meetings across north Wales. No venue was too modest or too intimidating, be it speaking at a local school or on a public forum in Geneva.

As the number of disarmament conferences held during the 1930s increased, Gladys Thoday made every effort to attend sessions across Europe as well as in Britain. She travelled to conferences in Paris and Brussels and on one of her visits to Geneva delivered a petition to the British Foreign Secretary, [Sir John Simon](#), demanding that the export of arms and war materials to Japan should immediately be prohibited. At Grenoble she presented the report of the British section of the Seventh Congress of the WILPF and in 1937 she travelled to Czechoslovakia where she addressed the Ninth World Congress of the WILPF as a member of the British delegation. At home she represented Wales on the Women's Peace Crusade Deputation that attended the Naval Disarmament Conference at St. James's Palace, London.

When their sons were grown, and in the years before the outbreak of war, Gladys and her husband, having moved to live in Bangor city, welcomed refugees from Nazi Europe into their Llanfairfechan home. This was no token gesture as the families who found refuge there remained living in the house for many years.

Gladys Thoday was a tour de force when it came to those causes she believed in, allowing nothing to stand in her way. She embraced fully her research at Cambridge and her list of publications was impressive. Her engagement with the suffrage movement was significant, especially so in South Africa where she took the debate to the highest level in the country. It was, however, the search for peace that dominated the last years of her life. From her membership of the most influential disarmament organisations to attending and speaking at international conferences, Gladys preached the gospel of disarmament with fervour.

Gladys Thoday died in Bangor on 9 August 1943 of a cerebral haemorrhage.

Author

Dinah Evans

Sources

Bangor University Archive, Gladys Thoday Mss., David Thoday Mss.

Minutes of Senate, UCNW, Bangor, Vol. vii, 1922

University of Manchester Special Collections

For dates of birth, marriage and death: [Ancestry.co.uk](#)

F.E. Weiss, 'Mrs. Thoday', *Nature* 152, 406 (1943)

S2A3 Biographical database of Southern African Science: [Thoday, Prof David \(botany\)](#)

S2A3 Biographical database of Southern African Science: [Thoday, Mrs Mary Gladys \(botany\)](#)

Women's Library Archives: [Volume of the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage](#)

Manchester Archives: [THE MANCHESTER SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE](#)

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