

Macmillan, (Jessie) Chrystal

(1872–1937)

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(Jessie) Chrystal Macmillan (1872–1937)

by unknown photographer, c. 1912

Mary Evans / The Women's Library

Macmillan, (Jessie) Chrystal (1872–1937), barrister and political activist, was born on 13 June 1872 at 8 Duke Street, Edinburgh, the only daughter in the family of nine children of John Macmillan, a wealthy tea merchant and past master of the Edinburgh Merchant Company, and his wife, Jessie Chrystal Finlayson. She was educated at St Leonard's School, St Andrews, and in 1892 was among the first women admitted to Edinburgh University, where in 1896 she took a BSc with first-class honours in mathematics and natural philosophy. She then attended the University of Berlin, before taking her MA in mental and moral philosophy at Edinburgh in 1900.

Chrystal Macmillan worked for the women's suffrage campaign in Scotland, as a member of the Scottish Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies, under the leadership of Sarah Siddons Mair. She was honorary secretary of the Women Graduates of the Scottish Universities (Parliamentary Franchise) Committee, which in 1906 initiated a court case over the rights of their members to the parliamentary franchise. Under legislation of 1868 the Scottish universities had four MPs; the electorate was the general councils of the universities, which included all their graduates. Macmillan, along with Elsie Inglis, Frances Melville, Margaret Nairn, and Frances Simson, argued through lawyers at the Court of Session that the word 'person', used throughout the statute, included women. The case was rejected, as was their appeal. In 1908 the case was taken to the House of Lords, where Macmillan argued it in person before the lord chancellor. Not herself a lawyer at this time, she showed considerable skill in presenting her case, but the case was rejected. Perhaps inevitably, the popular press dubbed her *Portia*. She moved to London, where she served on the executive of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), and became active in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, serving as secretary from 1913 to 1920. In this capacity she was in contact with the outstanding feminists of every country of the world, and was among the international compilers of *Woman Suffrage in Practice* (1913). She had also published two pamphlets, *The Struggle for Political Liberty* (1909) and *Facts versus Fancies on Woman Suffrage* (1914).

Chrystal Macmillan was a committed internationalist, believing that what all people had in common was more important than the frontiers that divided them. Immediately before the outbreak of war, she helped draft an international manifesto of women, signed by the representatives of twelve million women, and delivered it to the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and the European ambassadors in London on 31 July 1914. The manifesto entreated them to attempt conciliation and arbitration to avert 'the threatened unparalleled disaster'. After the fall of Antwerp, Chrystal Macmillan and Mary Sheepshanks negotiated money guarantees from the Belgian ambassador, and then took the first food convoy across the U-boat patrolled North Sea to Flushing. As an opponent of the war, Chrystal Macmillan resigned from the NUWSS. In December 1914 she proposed to Dr Aletta Jacobs, the leader of the Dutch suffrage movement, that an international women's congress be held at The Hague to 'discuss the principles on which peace should be made and, if so agreed, to act internationally'. The conference was held in April 1915, with Chrystal Macmillan one of only three British women able to attend: the British government had closed the North Sea to shipping, but Chrystal Macmillan was already in Holland. The congress elected delegates to carry its resolutions in person to the heads of belligerent and neutral governments, to petition them to negotiate an end to the war. Chrystal Macmillan was sent to make the case for a peace mediated by neutral countries to Scandinavia and Russia, without success. Later she visited the United States, assisting the opposition to America's entry into the war. In May 1919 she was a delegate to the International Congress of Women in Zürich, which issued the first public criticism of the punitive terms of the treaty of Versailles. Together with other leading international feminists, she then took the women's resolutions on disarmament and economic co-operation to the victorious allies at the Paris peace conference, only to be ignored once more.

After the war, with the vote won, and the legal profession opened to women for the first time, Chrystal Macmillan entered the Middle Temple, and was called to the bar on 28 January 1924, one of the first generation of women barristers. 'She was the right kind of lawyer', wrote Cicely Hamilton in *Time and Tide* (16 October 1937):

one who held that Law should be synonymous with Justice ... Her chief aim in life—one might call it her passion—was to give every woman of every class and nation the essential protection of justice. She was, herself, a great and very just human being ... She could not budge an inch on matters of principle but she never lost her temper and never bore a grudge in defeat.

An equal rights feminist and a Liberal in politics, in 1923 she was one of the founders of the Open Door Council, which campaigned to remove legal restrictions on the employment of women and opposed protective legislation. She served on the executives of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (which continued Josephine Butler's work for the civil rights of prostitutes and opposed the state regulation of prostitution). She gave expert evidence to various parliamentary committees, including that on the guardianship of children, and to the royal commission on unemployment insurance. She was particularly interested in the right of women to retain their own nationality on marriage to a foreigner, giving evidence to the select committee investigating it in 1922, and leading a deputation on the issue at The Hague in 1930. An expert on the legal status of women, she wrote the article on that topic for the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

In June 1937 Chrystal Macmillan had to have a leg amputated. She died from heart disease at 8 Chalmers Crescent, Edinburgh, on 21 September 1937, and was cremated on 23 September in Edinburgh. In her will she left bequests to the Open Door International for the Economic Emancipation of the Woman Worker, and to the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene. A memorial prize is awarded annually in her name by the society of the Middle Temple to the highest placed woman student in the bar's final examinations.

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Likenesses

- photograph, 1912, Women's Library, London [\[see illus.\]](#)
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Wealth at Death

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