

CARRICKFERGUS AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



SAIDIE PATTERSON MBE (1906-1985): TRADE UNIONIST

Saidie Patterson was born in Woodvale Street on the Shankill Road to shipyard blacksmith father and linen weaver out-worker mother Sarah. Living was difficult with low wages and many in the area were dependant on pawnshops to help make ends meet. Saidie was educated at Woodvale National School in Cambrai Street. Her childhood was happy with highlights such as the May Festival. Like most children she participated in household chores and attended Shankill Road Methodist Church whose influence guided her life. After her father's death in 1912, her mother remarried a few years later to Thomas Gracey, a fellow Methodist. Tragically Saidie's mother died in childbirth; a death that might have been avoided had she been able to afford the Doctor's 3s.6. fee. Saidie became a socialist from that experience.

In 1920 Saidie took a job in William Ewart & Son Ltd, a linen weaving factory and soon earned a reputation as one of the most skilful weavers in Ireland. The working environment was harsh, and workers were subject to poor health. One fellow worker who had returned early to work after childbirth and who was still weak was given a stool. The foreman noticed this and physically abused her, and she collapsed. Saidie took issue with the foreman and slapped him with scissors in one hand. She refused to apologise to the factory management. She was threatened with dismissal but retorted that she would report this to the local press. The Company backed down. Henceforth Saidie continued to work towards the betterment of working conditions and she subsequently joined the Transport and General Workers Union. In 1940 she called for full unionisation of the workforce, plus a wage demand of 15% and holidays with pay. Some 2000 workers joined the strike that lasted seven weeks and resulted in improved wages, sickness and holiday pay. Women achieved full Union recognition. Her leadership skills were recognised, and she was appointed to a full-time post in the textile branch of Transport and General Workers Union with responsibility for women workers where she worked until her retirement in 1960.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

In the political arena, Saidie was active within the Northern Ireland Labour Party, a party which attempted to position itself as an alternative to both unionism and nationalism, and which drew significant numbers of working-class Protestants into its ranks.

Her interest in social welfare went beyond the workplace, and as an active member of the Girls Club Union for over fifty years, she brought girls from the Falls and the Shankill together to join in a range of activities. The Standing Conference of Women's Organisations, formed in 1943 to bring 35 women's groups together and of which she was Treasurer, also provided opportunities to exercise her particular brand of Christian Socialism, focusing on infant mortality and the scourge of tuberculosis. Saidie broadened her horizons with her association with the Moral Rearmament Association, which convinced her that only through personal relationships could reconciliation between any opposing factions be brought about.

In 1973 she became Chair of Women Together, formed to provide shared holidays for the segregated children of Belfast. In 1976 she was made a lifetime Vice President. She went on to play an important role in the work of the Peace People, organizing the potentially explosive march of 50,000 women between the Falls and the Shankill. Saidie received five international peace awards, donating the money received to charities, and at the age of 69, she was presented with the World Methodist Peace Award.

Saidie Patterson died in 1985.

By: John Hulme

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