

Labour lives, no. 13

May (Abraham) Tennant, 1869-1946

May Abraham, pioneering trade union campaigner, champion of women workers, and the first woman factory inspector, was born into a professional Roman Catholic family in Dublin on 5 April 1869. Her childhood homes in the middle class suburbs of Rathmines and Rathgar were provided by her father, George Whitley Abraham, a Dublin lawyer, and, from the 1870s, Registrar in Lunacy, and her mother Margaret Curtin. May Abraham was home educated. This comfortable home life collapsed in 1887, when her father died, and she was only 18 years old. May Abraham left Dublin for London, moved into lodgings and, without any qualifications, looked for work.

It was a timely arrival. London's landscape as an imperial capital of power and wealth was being rubbed away to reveal a darker geography. Charles Booth's study of the 'labouring poor' was mapping the deepening shades of poverty to be found in London streets. Police brutality in Trafalgar Square in November 1887 brought out thousands to the funeral parades that followed, and embedded 'Bloody Sunday' into the language of public political protest. In the summer of 1888, young Bryant & May women match workers in east London brought their defiant solidarity against their low pay and their hazardous work to the pavements of Westminster. By autumn Whitechapel women walked their neighbourhood in fear and public fascination, when 'Jack the Ripper' exposed the lives of their sisters in poverty. London's political culture was being transformed through social concern and sensation, revealing the contours that would shape May Abraham's lifelong of commitment to women workers.

In London, May Abraham joined a busy labour market where women from similar backgrounds, though with better qualifications, sought out employment for independent living. An introductory letter to Emilia Dilke¹ brought May Abraham into radical and politically committed circles where young single women like her met a new world of industrial and political engagement. The recently-married Dilke had taken over as president of Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) shortly before their meeting.

In the League women factory workers and graduates, suffrage campaigners, socialists and reformers, mobilised their energies and enthusiasm to build, launch and support trade unions of women industrial workers. Affiliation to the League provided a network of support and representation for small local societies, along with other local and national trade union organisations. League members attended Trade Union Congress (TUC) conferences from 1877. May Abraham became secretary to Emilia Dilke and treasurer of the League. As an effective organiser and advocate within



their ranks, she travelled within the countries and regions of the United Kingdom in support of women beginning to organise within trade unionism. Perhaps this young, 'very handsome' Irishwoman, holding a leading post at the League's London headquarters, encouraged the League's renewed efforts in Ireland in 1890. Ten years earlier the League had helped launch two women's unions in Dublin, though neither had flourished.

May Abraham was only 21 years old when she made her first visit to Ireland as a trade union organiser, accompanying Florence Routledge, the League's honorary secretary, to Belfast. This trip aimed to set up trade unions among the large textile workforce of women in the city. A meeting at the Assembly Hall on 9 October 1890, 'packed almost to suffocation point,' heard both women from a platform hosted by the Belfast trades council. When May Abraham spoke about the linen industry's low wages, heavy fines, long hours and the need for factory inspection, the Belfast women cheered loudly. Outside the hall after the meeting, they thronged around her and cheered her repeatedly.

Three women's trade unions were launched the next day, for members working in the separate workplaces of linen production – the spinning mills, the weaving factories and the stitching warehouses – with the promise of up to ten more unions for the city's other women workers. Belfast's trades council set up an all-male committee to encourage this work. The success of May Abraham and the League's effort was short-lived. Three years later, at the 1893 TUC in Belfast, the WTUL backed a new trade union for women linen workers. The Textile Operatives' Society of Ireland was launched to a more enduring outcome.

May Abraham did not attend this new effort. Her experience and skills were now employed in new ways on this familiar territory. The Royal Commission on Labour, 1891-94, required detailed research of women's industrial employment to identify their main grievances, to examine their pay, hours, conditions, and report on its wider social impact. Four women were appointed as assistant commissioners. All were drawn from the ranks of women social and industrial campaigners. May Abraham was one of them.²

She reported on the English textile industries and, with Eliza Orme, reported on women's industrial work in Ireland.

Her term as an assistant commissioner led to May Abraham's appointment as the first female factory inspector, when she was still only 25 years old. Mary Patterson was assigned to Scotland at the same time. Trade unionists had called annually for women to be appointed as inspectors of women's workplaces since 1885, and the new Irish TUC of 1894 wanted permanent women factory inspectors based in Ireland.

In her new position May Abraham examined and prosecuted Irish workplaces. During her term of office, industrial inspection was strengthened by the 1895 Factory Act, which extended regulation to many more women's workplaces, especially laundries, a long standing aim of the WTUL. May Abraham opposed the exclusion of religious-run penitential laundries, or magdalenes, from this law. By 1896, May Abraham published a guide to the new factory act, and was appointed superintending inspector of a five-strong team of women factory inspectors. May Abraham and her fellow workers, as assistant commissioners or factory inspectors, exercised unprecedented public and legal authority as women within the exclusively male worlds of the civil service, industry and the law courts.

She continued to draw on her WTUL experience on the Home Office committee investigating dangerous substances, many of them, like white lead or phosphorous, associated with women's trades. She remained on this committee until 1899 even after she married its chairman, Jack (H.J.) Tennant in 1896, although she left her position when her first child was born in 1897. May Abraham, like many women campaigners, believed strongly that women with 'home ties' should not have to work. Her marriage brought May Abraham, the one-time agitator for women workers and widely acknowledged young Irish administrator, into the embrace of a prominent Liberal family, eclipsing her earlier sympathies with the Independent Labour Party. Jack Tennant would remain a Westminster

MP until 1918, and from 1906 a member of government. At some stage May moved from her childhood church to become an Anglican.

May Abraham did not leave public life completely on becoming May Tennant. In 1898, she took the chair of the newly formed Industrial Law Indemnity Fund that aided workers dismissed for giving proof of breaches of industrial laws. From time to time she was called back to sit on government committees. She resumed a more consistent pattern of government service after the outbreak of war in 1914. She was a founder member of the Central Committee on Women's Employment to assist unemployed women. In 1917 she was put in charge of the women's section of the National Service Department, and on the welfare committee for women munitions workers. Her eldest son, Henry, an airman, was killed in the war in May 1917. She was made a companion of honour that year. After the war, she held a number of offices in volunteer campaigning organisations, always linked to her life experiences, including maternal health care in the 1920s, the RAF benevolent fund and later, when she and Jack moved to Kent, the Royal Horticultural Society. Her husband died in 1935. She died on 11 July 1946 in Kent.

In her day May Abraham was well-known as an Irishwoman, acclaimed as 'one of our own,' although this identity was forgotten by the more forceful nationalism that followed, and eclipsed by her long service within the British state. Her commitment to a freer and safer industrial future for women workers, and Irish women in particular, is her legacy to Irish history.

Sources

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Notes

- 1 Emilia Strong (1840-1904) was twice married. As Emilia Pattison she was a founder member of the Women's Protective and Provident League, (WPPL) headed by the printer, Emma Paterson, from 1874. In 1885 Emilia Pattison married the radical Liberal MP, Sir Charles Dilke. The WPPL name was changed to Women's Trade Union League in 1889. After her death Mary Galway paid tribute to Emilia Dilke's contribution to women's trade unionism at the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC), calling for a fund to be set up in her name.
- 2 Clara Collett, Margaret Irwin and Eliza Orme were appointed at the same time.