



Margaret Haig Thomas, 2nd
Viscountess Rhondda

Margaret Haig Thomas, 2nd Viscountess Rhondda, suffragette and equalitarian feminist, daughter of an MP, survived the sinking of the *Lusitania*, promoted women's work during the war and was a successful businesswoman and magazine proprietor. She became a hereditary woman peer in her own right and fought a famous test case in an unsuccessful attempt to take her seat in the House of Lords in the 1920s.

Margaret was the daughter of Liberal MP and Welsh businessman David Alfred Thomas (D.A.) and Sybil Margaret Thomas (née Haig, distantly related to Field Marshall Douglas Haig who was commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France 1915-1918). Born in 1883, Margaret was educated first by governesses and then at a girl's school, before spending two terms at Somerville College, Oxford. She married Captain Humphrey Mackworth in 1908, but they divorced in 1922 and had no children. Margaret later wrote of their marriage,

"Humphrey held that no one should ever read in a room where anyone else wanted to talk. I... held, on the contrary, that no one should ever talk in a room where anyone else wanted to read."

Margaret's mother Sybil had always been an active, law-abiding supporter of women's suffrage. Margaret, however, joined the militant Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) and Sybil came to support the WSPU too. Margaret was involved in many suffragette activities, especially in the Newport area. Most famously she went to prison for setting fire to a post box, where she went on hunger strike and was released after six days under the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. She described the suffragette movement as,

"the very salt of life... a draught of fresh air into our padded, stilted lives... It gave us hope of freedom and power and opportunity."

She was employed by her father, at the suggestion of her mother, in his business empire, a large conglomerate of coal, shipping and publishing interests. She was a cross between 'a highly confidential secretary and a right-hand man, who should have the status of a business associate.' When he went abroad he gave her power of attorney with complete control.

Both were involved extensively with war work during the First World War. In May 1915, returning with D.A. from a US business trip, she was aboard the *Lusitania* when it was torpedoed off the Irish coast. After hours in freezing water she was rescued. She later reflected:

"What it did do was to alter my opinion of myself. I had lacked self-confidence...and here I had got through this test without disgracing myself. I had found that when the moment came I could control my fear."

In 1917 Margaret became the commissioner of Women's National Service for Wales and Monmouthshire, charged with recruiting volunteer women to work in agriculture. She appealed:

"The State has something to say to each of her daughters to-day and it is this: - I have new work in which I badly need your help. Is the service which you are already giving me of greater urgency to me than that which I need you to do now? If so, stay where you are; if not, come into the new work."

She also organised selection boards in Wales to recruit clerical workers and domestic workers for the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) to serve in France. This was to release male soldiers for fighting; four women clerks were seen as the equivalent of three soldier clerks. Margaret appealed to the "parents of South Wales to realise their great responsibilities and allow their daughters to go."

She continued to recruit for the WAAC (later QMAAC, the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps) during 1917 and 1918.

In February 1918 she took up a major new role in London, as Chief Controller of women's recruitment in the Ministry of National Service. An article published in her name and titled, 'The Women of Great Britain' declared:

"Nothing in the whole conduct of the War has been more striking than the readiness and the ability of the women in nearly all the belligerent nations to render invaluable service to their respective countries and nothing has been stranger than the slowness of various Governments to realise the vast capacity of the resources upon which they might draw."

The comment about the slowness of Government reflected some of the frustrations and obstructions she found throughout her war work. In 1918 she was the only woman member of the Staff Investigation Committee, set up to examine administrative staffing in the Ministry of Munitions. Women made up virtually all the clerical staff in the Ministry, as well as carrying out chemical and mathematical research, statistics and accountancy.

Margaret was also concerned with the discharge of women war workers from government departments after the war, in favour of returning servicemen; she sat on the Women's Advisory Committee at the Ministry of Reconstruction from its formation in 1917 and formed the Women's Political and Industrial League in 1919 to lobby for equal employment opportunities.

In 1918, in recognition of his war service, her father D.A. Thomas was created Viscount Rhondda. He died in July 1918 and Margaret inherited his title, but hereditary women peers in their own right were not entitled to sit and vote in the House of Lords. In a famous test case, she petitioned in 1920 for the right to receive a writ of summons to Parliament, basing her claim on the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 which stated that 'A woman shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function.'

Her petition was considered by the House of Lords Committee for Privileges, which initially found in her favour. For a brief period of time it appeared that women would be able to sit in the Lords and she received a letter of congratulation from John St Loe Strachey, editor of the *Spectator*. Margaret was cautious, however, replying:

"I am not in the House of Lords yet, in spite of the Committee of Privileges, and I am afraid the Lord Chancellor is going to move against me".

She was quite correct. Lord Birkenhead (F. E. Smith), the Lord Chancellor, opposed the admission of women to the Lords and re-constituted an enlarged committee. His arguments carried the committee, which reversed its original decision in May 1922. The case set a precedent which lasted until 1958, when women were first allowed to sit in the House of Lords as life peers, following the Life Peerages Act 1958. Hereditary women peers in their right were allowed to sit in the House of Lords by the Peerage Act 1963.

Between the wars, Lady Rhondda was one of Britain's leading feminists, a proponent of the equal-rights tradition of feminism. In 1920 she set up the feminist weekly journal *Time and Tide*, covering politics, economics, social issues, literature and the arts. In 1921 she launched the Six Point Group, which campaigned on six key issues for women (including equal pay and equal opportunities). In 1926, with others, she set up the Open Door Council to campaign against 'protective' legislation for women. She lived to see the passage of the Life Peerages Act on 30 April 1958, but died on 20 July, before the first women took their seats as life peers in the Lords in October.

In 1917 Margaret said in an interview:

"I think the war, awful as it has been, did a wonderful thing for women. It brought about a revolution for them which one may well imagine centuries might have otherwise been needed to encompass. But now women have seen what they can do; they have learned to have confidence in themselves to undertake the most amazing and difficult tasks."

Sources:

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