

The Reverend Barbara Thomas 1892-1981: ‘... a force for goodness, righteousness, justice, and truth’¹

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Introduction

This article presents a case study of the role that the Reverend Barbara Thomas played within Cheltenham’s League of Nations Union (LNU) and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) branches and the ways she encouraged a broader and increasing engagement with internationalist foreign policy and pacifism. Although a prominent and pioneering figure in her locality, she never assumed sufficient national importance to feature in the archival collections of the LSE’s Women’s Library or the WILPF collection or indeed general histories of the LNU. However, she left a rich and, so far, untapped archive of her own papers at Harris Manchester College, Oxford and it is these papers on which much of this article is based.

Although women preachers were not common in the first part of the twentieth century, they were becoming increasingly active, especially within the free churches.² Perhaps the most famous was Maude Royden. Educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, she became a suffragist, pacifist and campaigner for the ordination of women. More still, she acquired a formidable international reputation as a preacher, earning respect and admiration from those who heard her speak.³ Barbara Thomas’ reputation may not have reached the proportions of Maude’s, but as her archive at Harris Manchester College Oxford witnesses, she was a prolific and knowledgeable preacher who, albeit on a smaller stage, spoke with conviction.

Like Maude, Barbara operated in what was at that time a male sphere. Whilst not proclaiming herself a suffragist, Barbara very much embodied the movement's spirit by becoming one of the first women ministers within the Unitarian Church, in Cheltenham. However, her importance is not just a theological one. As this article will demonstrate, she also played a very active role in the LNU and WILPF, as well as finding ways to serve the local community.

What is offered here is a biographical account of Barbara's life and career in Cheltenham as she combined the roles of Unitarian minister, peace campaigner, advocate for women's rights, socialist and promoter of educated and responsible citizenship. Although she preached in many places, her impact was clearly restricted by the small size of her Unitarian congregation in a town where it was not always made to feel welcome. Barbara's archive, although catalogued, remains relatively untouched at Harris Manchester College, Oxford and further examination of it would be a fruitful and rewarding experience for anyone looking to study the career of a pioneering woman.

Maude Royden, in her preface to the 1929 pamphlet *Women Free Church Ministers* by Dora Northcroft (featuring Barbara Thomas and twenty-one others), challenged her spiritual contemporaries with the view that:

It is because the conscience of Christendom is becoming more sensitive and its vision clearer with every generation that women are asking, not now for improvement of status, but for absolute equality.⁴

At the forefront of this movement was Cheltenham's Barbara Thomas. As well as her tireless work as a minister at Bayshill Unitarian Church for more than thirty years (her list of sermons preached in the town and elsewhere is a comprehensive and impressive one), Barbara was an educator, pacifist, campaigner and activist who promoted the cause for peace on many

different platforms and occasions within the town. Without ever claiming to be a suffragette or feminist, she spoke out for women's rights. She also was not afraid to confront controversy.⁵ Above all, she urged her fellows to become responsible and thoughtful citizens, ready to question and challenge the decisions of those in power – especially in the area of foreign policy.

Early Life

Barbara was the daughter of Ethel and Emmanuel Lewis Henshaw Thomas. Her father was a Unitarian minister and a British subject born in Colombo, Ceylon. Her maternal great grandfather was Thomas Prime, who ran a notable silver plating business in Birmingham, once visited by the scientist Michael Faraday, who was impressed with the methods used. Thomas was a local councillor for many years and served as mayor for the city in 1869.⁶ He was a supporter of religious toleration and fought for the removal of disabilities against Catholics and Jews. He campaigned for free trade, the abolition of the Corn Laws and for the 1832 Great Reform Bill. He also sought to provide Birmingham with a better provision of education for the poor.

Thomas's son, another Thomas, followed him into and continued the family business but did not pursue a political career. His obituary states in rather unflattering terms that:

Apart from his long connection with the plating trade, and the improvements which he contributed to it, the life of Mr. Thomas Prime was wholly uneventful ... he sought no public office, but confined himself to aiding the various organisations in connection with the Unitarian congregation of the Old Meeting, of which he was an active and most useful member.⁷

However, Thomas and his wife, Elizabeth, managed to produce a large family of eight children. The eldest was Elizabeth Jane, known to Barbara as ‘Aunt Lily’, with whom she kept up a long and intimate correspondence whilst in Cheltenham. The youngest was Ethel Grace, Barbara’s mother. Ethel married the Rev. Emmanuel Lewis Henshaw Thomas in 1891.⁸ Emmanuel Thomas had returned from Ceylon to England by 1861, first to attend the Blue Coat school in Oldham and then to become a student of Theology.⁹ The 1891 census lists him as a Unitarian minister and various press reports record him leading services and preaching in the Lancaster region. Emmanuel and Ethel had three children of whom Barbara (born 1892 in Liverpool) was the eldest. Her sister Ursula was born in 1894 and her brother Roger in 1900.

The family clearly valued an academic upbringing for their children. Roger attended Manchester University where he gained First Class Honours in Greek and was awarded a research scholarship to Brussels reading Greek inscriptions. Ursula (who only lived to be twenty-six years old), having attended St Albans High School for Girls, obtained an intermediate BA in German and Latin before graduating from Manchester University with honours in French Literature and Language.¹⁰ Barbara is listed as a student in the 1911 census. However, in a CV which she compiled when looking for employment, she records that she attended Withington Girls School in Manchester and St Albans High School for Girls. On leaving school at eighteen Barbara attended Mrs Houter’s Secretarial Training Office in London from 1910-11.¹¹ She then left for Bremen in Germany, taking up a post as ‘foreign correspondent’ with the textile firm P.N. Ulrichs and Co.

Returning to England in 1913, Barbara worked as a foreign correspondent with the Manchester Velvet Co. Ltd. Between 1915-17, due to the shortage of men during the war, she taught German at Manchester Grammar School. In 1917 she passed her intermediate London BA. However, her father’s death that year caused her to look for employment again and from

1917 to 1921 she worked as assistant to the Secretary of the Provisional Cotton Research Committee in Manchester.¹² Her salary was £350 a year plus 10% superannuation provision – a good rate for a woman at this time. However, in 1921 things took a turn for the worse for her, as the first signs of phthisis (pulmonary tuberculosis) appeared. Barbara spent the early part of 1922 convalescing in a sanatorium in England before transferring to one in Arosa, Switzerland. It was not until May 1923 that the Swiss doctors reported her fit for work, and June 1923 that an English doctor reported her cured.

Much of Barbara's efforts were now concentrated on finding suitable employment. Despite her clean bill of health, she was advised not to return to Manchester. Initially she wrote to the League of Nations asking if they had any secretarial posts. Her CV lists a proficiency in shorthand (English, French and German), some ability in Latin and Greek and experience of committee work, keeping minutes and records, drafting reports, much correspondence, interviewing etc. Her attempt to find work within the League was not successful. She was told there were no available posts for stenographers and that if there were, they would be appointed by competitive examination. The list of employers Barbara wrote to at this time is long and comprehensive and she even took to advertising herself in various local newspapers. Despite an excellent reference from her manager (Arthur Crossley) in the Cotton Research Committee, she had little success. For some employers her health was still a concern and, in a rejection note from a headmistress of a London girls' school, it was thought best for her 'to avoid the dirt and dust of the East End'.¹³

Cheltenham and Bayshill

Whether Barbara was choosing to act on this advice, her next move brought her to Cheltenham, on the grounds that 'it would provide a healthy environment for two years after which she could look for other employment'.¹⁴ In the event, she remained there for the rest of

her life. Despite her time spent in the business world, Barbara had not abandoned all thoughts of an alternative career and since 1918 she had been a member of the Manchester Unitarian Lay Preachers' Union and preached regularly in the Manchester area.

Fortuitously, we might say, the Unitarian Church at Bayshill, in the centre of Cheltenham, was advertising for a new minister. It was offering a salary of £175 with the possibility of increase over time. There is little in the record to suggest why Barbara made this move. It may have been out of frustration at not finding clerical employment, concerns for her health, or a call of faith. Despite her father professing 'not to like churches', the family was a religious one steeped in Unitarian tradition and service.¹⁵ Either way, Barbara accepted the position of preacher and moved with her mother to 9 Lansdown Crescent, a short walk from her church. In a letter to Aunt Lily, she recounts that her mother had particular tastes in wall paper and that white and green were to be favoured over pink, yellow or fawn.¹⁶ She also wrote to her former mentor from Manchester, Arthur Crossley, saying 'Cheltenham is a dear place, it's delightful in the hills where there are golf links'. He replied wishing her all the best there.

However, Barbara's appointment at Bayshill may not have been entirely unexpected to her new congregation. The church's chairman, Rev. Rudolph Davis, was an old college friend of her father. Furthermore, he had received such reports of Miss Thomas from London and Yorkshire, and from the ministers and leading officials of their body:

... that he rather wondered whether there was any earthly being who could answer to such descriptions (*laughter and applause*); but was sure that no such descriptions could surpass their delight in having her their minister, and the delight of the ministers of the Province that she had become one of their

number. She would be the only lady minister amongst them, but he trusted it would not be long before she had another to accompany her.¹⁷

It was of little surprise then, that after being a preacher there for three years, and having passed her theological exams, she was ordained as minister for Bayshill in 1926, a position she would retain until her retirement in 1957. In later years she also ministered at Cirencester (from 1932 to 1943) and Gloucester (from 1956 to 1957).

On her arrival at Bayshill there was some claim that she was the first ever lady minister of the Unitarian Church. However, in a letter to the press, her friend Theodora Flower Mills helpfully pointed out that this honour went to Miss Gertrud Von Petzold who, twenty years previously, was installed in charge of Small Heath Church in Birmingham. However, Barbara's appointment as a female minister was a first locally.¹⁸

Her arrival in the town was accompanied by the strong sense of purpose that she exhibited all her life. Bayshill had been without a minister for more than a year and attendance had dwindled from before the war to the point that it had been closed for some time. Undeterred by what to some seemed a hopelessly moribund cause, she announced her intention to rebuild the church and resume services as she felt there was still a strong Unitarian community within the town. In her welcome speech she also hinted at a broader message not just to rebuild the church but a wider community:

She admired either a good sturdy Liberal, Conservative or a Labour man; but found it very difficult to admire the person who was good at carrying out nothing. People who had as much to be thankful for, ought to care about what their Government was doing and ought to worry about it. The Christian life ... did not mean blinding ourselves or making ourselves deaf, betraying the witnesses of our senses or shutting ourselves away in a fool's paradise, devoting ourselves to ease and self-indulgence, shirking all

effort and trial. The kind of Christians they wanted to grow at Bayshill was the kind who helped other people because they liked helping other people, and who were fair to other people because they loved justice and fairness.¹⁹

Local Politics

As well as building up her church, Barbara also turned her attention to local politics. At first, she supported the town's Liberals – possibly because there was no Labour candidate then. In 1923 she attended a meeting in support of a Mr Plaidstowe, the town's Liberal candidate, and by 1925 she was vice-president of the Liberal Association and treasurer for the Young Liberals. However, in 1926 she began to drift towards the Labour Party (particularly for its support for the Peace movement) and by 1929 was acting in support of their candidate, a Mr Piggott. In 1935, she caused a certain amount of concern by inviting Mrs Pakenham, the then Labour candidate, to preach at Bayshill. In reply to an anonymous letter in the press, she made it clear that:

We were glad to welcome her to our pulpit and grateful for her service, not alone because she is a daughter of two distinguished Unitarian families, nor alone because of her fine work for peace and the League of Nations, but chiefly because of her personal witness to a religious vocation in modern social problems. My pulpit has not in my time been used for party propaganda, either by myself or by anyone else. On the other hand, we do not hold that adherence to a political party disqualifies us for sincere inquiry into the will of God.²⁰

Beyond the walls of her church, Barbara was more open about her support for Labour. When Mrs Pakenham gave a talk on Labour's plan to make banks 'the property of the nation', and

prevent the over-capitalization of certain industries to restore benefit to those in need, Barbara appealed to women to act in the coming election, reminding them that:

Women were in the majority. Some still thought elections were a man's job, others that in times of crises and panic such as the Great War, women were desperately anxious to do something but were helpless. Now, when there was a crisis but no panic, power was in the women's hands.²¹

In 1937, responding to a call for more Labour candidates in local elections, she stood for the town's Pittville ward stating that 'it was right there should be some representation of the wage-earning class, who have known or are in danger of poverty.'²² In spite of a swing towards Labour, her attempt to defeat Harold Avery (the Chamber of Commerce candidate), was defeated by more than 500 votes. Undeterred, she stood again for Pittville in 1945 but, along with three other candidates from her church, she was defeated. In an address to her Bayshill congregation, although remaining stoic, she made clear her disappointment, saying 'that they [the four members who had stood as Labour candidates] were not proud of Cheltenham for standing almost alone in its refusal to join the onward march of England into the new world'.²³

Barbara tried a third time in 1946 when she stood for Cheltenham's Lansdown Ward, in which there was a straight fight between Conservative and Labour candidates. However, this too resulted in an 'easy win' for her rival, a Mr Waite.²⁴ Although her attempts to be elected onto local government were met with disappointment, Barbara had some success in 1949 when it was announced that her name was being added to a list of twenty-nine new magistrates for Gloucestershire. The *Gloucestershire Echo* noted in its report that at Bayshill Unitarian Church 'her tenure of the office has far exceeded that of any other minister and that in local affairs she has taken keen and energetic interest'.²⁵

League of Nations Union and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Despite her claims not to politicise the pulpit, Barbara took a number of opportunities to use her position as minister to promote the work of the League of Nations. Her archive at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, contains a handwritten list of fourteen sermons she delivered at Bayshill on topics related to the League of Nations and the United Nations. Some were on general themes such as peace and disarmament, whilst two at least were specifically about the work of the League. The first of these on 'The League of Nations' was given around the mid-1920s, whilst a later one entitled 'The Plain Man and the League of Nations' was delivered in June 1932. In her earlier sermon she posited a view of the League that was very much based on a clear sense of duty and rational common sense for all. She argued that the world had a choice between destructive forces of difference and disunity (patriotism) or a fundamental righteousness of unity:

That is what the League of Nations is. It is an experiment, set in the clear hard reality of the world of actual experience and obvious differences, set up on the hypothesis that there is a fundamental unity binding us into a whole, deeper than all the differences which we see and know. It's just because those differences are so largely represented that it is a practical test and so has a special value which no individual theory or private adventure can have.²⁶

In her later sermon, delivered in advance of a visit to the town by Sir Norman Angell (League of Nations committee member, author and Labour Party MP), she stated to her congregation that even if the 'radiant sanity called common sense' was missed by the learned and powerful, the plain man should easily recognise it and see it reflected in the work of the

League. She exhorted her congregation not just to go and hear Sir Norman Angell but also to acquaint themselves with all matters of foreign policy and not to be deterred by the endless complications expressed by politicians. For her, the pursuit of peace was common sense, obtainable by her eponymous 'Plain Man', so long as people made the effort to educate themselves:

The long patient study of facts is necessary; it is impossible to act justly where nothing is known: but the long difficult investigation of international problems must be able to rely on common sense decisions by the ordinary hard-worked and much occupied citizens of the nations. If from their hard work and many occupations they have learned no sense, then they will be silly and say: 'for certain we don't want war, but neither will we support efforts to [organise] peace: we will leave things to muddle along and curse blindly when the explosions which have happened in the past happen again'.²⁷

Although her support for peace and disarmament was made plain in her sermons, as well publicised as they were, the fact is that she was often preaching to a congregation of a little more than forty. As important as her work as a minister was in her promotion of peace, it was as much her roles in the town's branches of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the League of Nations Union (LNU) that brought her to the attention of a wider audience.²⁸

Barbara was an active and outspoken member of the WILPF for well over a decade.²⁹ The town's branch of the WILPF had come into being in 1925 and her first recorded association with it was in February 1927 when she chaired a meeting held at the YMCA at which an address was given by Miss Dorothy Woodman – a leading official of the League in

London. With typical forthrightness, Barbara laid out to her audience the reasons why peace was something that all had a duty to campaign for:

... it seemed to her a perfectly obvious thing nowadays to join all peace societies ... in trying to educate public opinion there seemed a definite job to be done and that was to bring community feelings up to the standard which had been reached in individuals. Our system of dealing with our neighbours, as individuals, seemed to quite definitely be one stage higher than the methods adopted when it came to nations.³⁰

A second meeting that year was held at the town hall and was addressed by the WILPF chair, Miss K. D. Courtney. It was noted that, despite its brief existence, the local branch had made good progress. For the next few years, the WILPF held regular meetings and discussed such topics as disarmament, the threat of a war in the air and the possibility of sanctions against Italy. Press reports named Barbara Thomas as president of the local WILPF branch, and she frequently chaired its meetings. In 1933 she announced that she was regretfully resigning her position owing to a great pressure of work, although her interest was as keen as ever. This was borne out by the fact that throughout the 1930s she continued as a vice-president, often spoke at meetings and frequently appeared in the correspondence pages of the local press. In October 1933 she addressed a second of three meetings held by the Cheltenham WILPF on the topic of 'peace' in which she criticised governments for indirectly promoting war through their support of the armaments industry.³¹

By 1934 though, the Cheltenham branch of WILPF was reporting fewer members and a shortage of funds. Undeterred, Barbara pushed for even more vigorous action, extolling individual members to 'be prepared to antagonise popular emotions of nationalism' on the grounds that 'politics really did interfere with our daily lives and had the power to get us into a fearful mess'.³² As the decade progressed she expressed increasing disapproval of the

actions of the government and in 1938 called for a petition to recall Mr Eden (the former foreign secretary) in order to oppose any further assistance to Italy and to impose sanctions. A year later, again frustrated by what she saw as a lack of clarity in government policy, she argued that if a war was to be fought then ‘we should try to make clear to the world the sort of aims we should like to pledge ourselves to in the war — if necessary, over the heads of our Government’.³³

Such comments did not necessarily advocate civil disobedience but were very much in line with her moral stance, in which goodness was more readily to be found in individuals than in states. It stressed the importance of the individual’s conscience in foreign policy and the need for all to educate and involve themselves in such decision making – particularly if the mistakes of the past were not to be repeated. It therefore comes as little surprise that she became an active member of the LNU.

Although her earlier attempts to find employment with the League had not been successful, in Cheltenham she was soon in contact with the LNU’s local branch. She was part of the platform party at the ‘great meeting’ which took place in November 1923 at which Sir Willoughby Dickinson gave a notable speech on the League’s aims to a large and enthusiastic audience.³⁴ Over the next decade she was a frequent speaker herself on the League, either at its own meetings or those held by her study group at Bayshill Church.

As with her sermons, Barbara Thomas saw it very much as her moral duty to inform others of the way to peace, but equally the duty of active citizens to seek out information for themselves so that they could challenge government on such issues. In 1925 her series of lectures on the Geneva Protocol and the applications of sanctions raised several important points for the ensuing discussion. Those taking part in the Bayshill Adult School study group expressed appreciation of the very instructive manner in which Miss Thomas had introduced

her subject.³⁵ The interconnectivity of her particular networks was also demonstrated in that the League was often the subject of her addresses and discussion with the WILPF. Typical of such collaborations was a house-to-house canvass of the town organised in 1931 under the auspices of its Cheltenham Branch, the object being to further awareness of the World Disarmament Declaration Campaign. At a joint conference, three members of the League of Nations, the No More War Movement, and the Women's International League respectively were chosen to call together an ad hoc committee to carry out the canvas.³⁶

However, at times Barbara's views showed a divergence from the LNU. In 1935 she took part in what was referred to as The Cheltenham Debate – with the then president of the Cheltenham LNU Branch (CLNU)), Daniel Lipson – the resolution being that 'this meeting does not support the proposal for an international police force'. She spoke against the resolution, arguing that even after fifteen years' work for peace the nations were still not yet disarmed – partly because France would not concede equality to Germany and partly because Britain would not give France collective security. Her view was that a more robust approach was now needed to compel peace-making to go faster. This would of course be supplemented with educational work, but it was important to put force behind law so as to give people confidence and to let them have a chance to develop the peace mind.³⁷

In the event, she lost the vote by a large majority but her defeat can be seen as emblematic of the growing divide within the ranks of the LNU between those who wished to preserve peace through appeasement and those who favoured a more active defence of it. Her stance on such matters became even more apparent in 1936 when, in her attacks on Italy's treatment of Abyssinia, she called for a more vigorous application of sanctions:

It is becoming clearer and clearer to us that the organisation of peace has to be as efficient and productive as is the organisation of war. The majority of people in this

country believed in using force to defend themselves when attacked. It was just as right and reasonable to use force in collective defence.³⁸

Such views did not find favour amongst many of the CLNU who felt that this approach could just as easily lead Europe once more to war. However, despite her criticisms and a sense of shame felt towards the League of Nations' failure to make any headway with disarmament, she continued to see it as the most effective way to preserve peace, so long as it was prepared to act against would-be aggressors, 'after all, world condemnation counted for something, and Japan and Germany might later have to come into step with the rest of the nations'.³⁹

Throughout 1938, her voice was often heard through the letter pages of the local press, frequently provoking robust responses from others. In February 1938 she wrote:

The loss of the Foreign Secretary [Eden] appears to be the worst blow yet struck at the policy of appeasement through the League of Nations. It represents the open abandonment by Great Britain of the League system and a condoning of the fruits of aggression. If the people who through the Peace Ballot placed Anthony Eden in power again assert themselves, the cause of international justice may yet be saved ... this is not a matter of party, but of principle which appeals to people of all parties.⁴⁰

Judging by the response, her views were not shared by the majority of those corresponding to the editor. The prevailing view was that Eden's resignation was no loss and that a new approach was called for, 'the practical realism of the Prime Minister rather than in the Utopian idealism of Mr Eden'.⁴¹ This was supported by a view that Britain had little to gain from continued membership of the League of Nations and that an isolationist policy would be a more effective means of avoiding being dragged into war. Barbara, on the other hand, argued that the League of Nations represented the rule of law, and in all cases, the law must be upheld against transgressors.⁴² However, as even its most ardent supporters were to find,

when it came to enforcing this law the bonds of collective security were increasingly being tested by self-interest. Barbara was aware of this shift in the public mood but remained unaffected in her role as educator of the public. In her message to all those who had written against her, she offered:

If the writers will continue to join in ‘co-operative thinking’ on these issues, not only in the Press, but through all the other means available, League of Nations Union discussions, etc., I am convinced they will be giving extremely valuable service to their generation in the great task of our time.⁴³

Her next series of letters came later in the year, as Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and Britain signed the Munich agreement. Daniel Lipson had previously tried to justify the settlement as one of benefit to the Czechs – a notion that she now attacked as being a complete disaster, not just for the Czechs but for Britain as well. In her view it would:

... pay Hitler to be angry so long as we are willing to appease him, and consequently moral blindness and heartlessness to his victims is more dangerous to this country than Hitler and all his armaments.⁴⁴

Once again, though, the prevailing view of the majority of those who wrote in answer to her letter was that it was a good thing that war had been avoided and that ‘the Czechs are undoubtedly a fine people, and should be able to work out their own salvation under the new conditions’.⁴⁵

With the onset of war, whilst continuing to denounce the failures of the League of Nations, she spoke increasingly about a new beginning for it – a New Commonwealth. At an LNU meeting in Bourton-on-the-Water, she did not look to minimise the extent in which the League of Nations had failed in its main objective – the preservation of peace – but pointed out instead the ways in which it had succeeded in forwarding the social welfare of the world.

She felt that a Federal Union would be a necessity after the war.⁴⁶ This opinion was not shared with some others in the CLNU.⁴⁷ Before the war, Barbara had been a staunch pacifist, but had now changed her views, coming to believe that force must be used to aid the defenceless and to protect the weak against a force which she believed was definitely evil.⁴⁸

Later Years and Legacy

Barbara served as a vice-president of the CLNU between 1938-44. From 1945, although her name does not appear on a list of committee members for the newly formed town branch of the United Nations Association (UNA), she attended its meetings in the 1960s and 1970s and led discussion groups.⁴⁹ An undated letter from Lucia Turner (secretary of the Cheltenham UNA branch) mentions that Barbara was familiar with the Association.⁵⁰ Barbara made her support for it apparent in other ways. In 1947, as leader of a Bayshill Church discussion group ‘she spoke of the present opportunity of ending war and of building up a new world as more hopeful than ever before’.⁵¹

Throughout her ministry at Bayshill, Barbara was keen to involve youngsters in the activities of the Church, both in terms of taking part in services and in wider community projects. One such were the Bayshill Players, a drama group who gave many performances in the town in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵² Ten of them travelled by coach to attend a Youth Peace Pilgrimage in London in 1939, and several members became activists for peace after the Second World War.⁵³ The local organiser of the group was seventeen-year-old Margaret Hamilton.⁵⁴ Margaret married another of the group, Laurie Clements, and in the 1940s both were active in the local Labour Party, with Margaret regularly speaking out in the press on issues such as fair local rates, free places at the Grammar School and the nationalisation of

the mines.⁵⁵ Laurie became chairman of the local Labour Party group and Margaret stood as councillor for the St Mark's area of the town.

The years following the Second World War saw Barbara remain active. She not only continued to conduct services and preach in the town and further afield but she also organised and provided refreshments for bring and buys, garden parties and fetes in support of the church. She hosted weekly meetings of the Bayshill Women's League – at times in her own house whilst alterations were made to Bayshill – delivering a series of lectures on Russian literature (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev) to its members. Despite her failure to get elected to the local council she was kept busy with her responsibilities as a Justice of the Peace, a post she had been appointed to in March 1949. Another of her efforts at this time was the setting up of several old people's clubs across Cheltenham. By 1949, as secretary of the town's old people's welfare committee, Barbara had helped establish six clubs (soon to increase to eleven) with more than 600 members.⁵⁶ Added to this was a provision for meals-on-wheels and home visits.⁵⁷

However, despite such service to her community, there was always a prevailing sense that she was part of a group that was kept at arm's length by the establishment. In 1942 Barbara had made an application to the War Office Chaplains' Department in response to notices for the appointment of women assistants to chaplains serving with the Armed Forces. The disappointing reply was that Unitarian appointments were not made. In expressing a sorrow that Christian sectarianism still refused to co-operate with Unitarians, even on national service, she remarked, 'If there is anything I could do to break down this ban, I would do it, honestly, for religion's sake and not for any supposed sectarian advantage on my side'.⁵⁸

In terms of Barbara's life and work in Cheltenham, two comments stand out from her obituary which add to the picture of the woman she was. The first is that to many in her Bayshill congregation she was 'Ma' (a reference to the Cappadocian goddess), 'more mother no doubt than goddess, though one might say of her that intellectually and physically she was larger than life'. The second point testifies to her generosity of spirit in that, even in retirement, she kept an open house for the children of her neighbourhood, undaunted by frequent break-ins and the damage that happened there.⁵⁹

Barbara's legacy may not be of the 'blue plaque' kind, but her work as a pacifist and nonconformist minister was based on a desire to encourage educated and aware citizens to challenge their government on issues of foreign policy and beyond. In her support for the LNU and the WILPF she inspired others to see Britain's foreign affairs as their own intimate concern and to take action when needed. To her credit, Barbara was able to deliver this message not with dogma or bluster but with a measured sensibility.

Writing to the editor of *The Inquirer* on the announcement of Barbara's death, Stella Pudles (née Eldridge) as 'one who knew her', acknowledged the great debt she owed her. Quoting from her diary she recalled visits to 'No 14' (Rotunda Terrace), where Barbara '... never stops talking, and has a quick sense of humour. And yet is in no way egoistic. She talks for others and not for herself. I love her and admire her'.⁶⁰

¹ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 25 Sep. 1926. Words spoken by Rev. R. Davis and Mr Daniel Lipson at Barbara's induction as Bayshill minister.

² Dora M. Northcroft, *Women Free Church Ministers* (London: Edgar G. Dunstan and Co., 1929). Barbara is included in a list of twenty-two biographies of such ministers.

³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 2 Oct. 1920, 5. Her 'burning eloquence' was much admired by those present. For a general biography of Royden see Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden: a Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

⁴ Northcroft, *Women Free Church Ministers*, preface by Maude Royden.

⁵ Harris Manchester College Oxford: Barbara Thomas Archive (hereafter BTA), Box 6, Letter to her Aunt Lily. Barbara writes that Bayshill is to host a visit from Mira Behn (Miss Wade) who was touring the UK raising support for Gandhi and Indian independence.

⁶ *Illustrated Midland News*, 19 Feb. 1870, gives an account of his career in the city.

⁷ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 19 May 1892 for his obituary.

⁸ All genealogical data given here for the Thomas family can be found either on *Ancestry* or *Find My Past* digital databases.

⁹ Thomas prepared for the ministry at the Manchester Home Missionary College and Manchester New College, London (now Manchester College, Oxford). At the former he was a pupil of the Rev. William Gaskell, the husband of Mrs Gaskell, the novelist.

¹⁰ *Manchester Courier*, 2 Jul. 1914.

¹¹ BTA, Box 6, Copy of CV.

¹² *Alderley & Wilmslow Advertiser*, 13 Jul. 1917. Gives an obituary for Rev E. H. L. Thomas, 'a gentleman of ripe scholarship, an acceptable preacher, and a faithful pastor'.

¹³ BTA, Box 9, Letters Jun. to Nov. 1923.

¹⁴ BTA, Box 9, Letter 11 Oct. 1923.

¹⁵ *The Inquirer*, 11 Jul. 1981, obituary.

¹⁶ BTA, Box 9, Letter 12 Oct. 1923.

¹⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 17 Nov. 1923.

¹⁸ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 24 Nov. 1923.

¹⁹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 17 Nov. 1923.

²⁰ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 15 Nov. 1935.

²¹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 7 Nov. 1935.

²² *Gloucestershire Echo*, 15 Oct. 1937.

²³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 6 Nov. 1945.

²⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 5 Dec. 1946.

²⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 8 Mar. 1949.

²⁶ BTA, Boxes 1-8, Handwritten copies of Rev. Thomas' Bayshill sermons.

²⁷ BTA, Box 4, Sermons.

²⁸ For broader (if rather dated) studies of these two movements see also: Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1965* (London: WILPF, British Section, 1980), Catherine Foster, *Women for All Seasons, The Story of the WILPF* (Georgia USA: University of Georgia Press, 1989) and Donald Birn, *The League of Nations Union 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

²⁹ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 5 Feb. 1927. Barbara presided over a meeting which stated the movement's aims were to 'unite all women of whatever country, who are opposed to every kind of war, exploitation, and oppression; and who work for universal disarmament, and for the solution of conflicts by the recognition of human solidarity; by conciliation and arbitration; by world co-operation; and by the establishment of social, political, and economic justice for all, without distinction of sex, race, class, or creed'.

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- ³⁰ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 3 Feb. 1927.
- ³¹ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 14 Oct. 1933.
- ³² *Gloucestershire Echo*, 25 Jan. 1934.
- ³³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 20 Oct. 1939.
- ³⁴ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 17 Nov. 1923.
- ³⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 12 May 1925.
- ³⁶ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 20 Jun. 1931.
- ³⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 21 Feb. 1935.
- ³⁸ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 6 Jul. 1936.
- ³⁹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 18 Mar. 1937. Quoted from Rev. Thomas's speech.
- ⁴⁰ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 26 Feb. 1938.
- ⁴¹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 28 Feb. 1938. Letter from 'Charlex'.
- ⁴² BTA: Box 6. Letter to *Cheltenham Echo*, 21 Sep. 1938. Barbara planned to send postcards to all sitting MPs asking for them to support arbitration for Czechoslovakia.
- ⁴³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 1 Mar. 1938.
- ⁴⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 17 Dec. 1938.
- ⁴⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 23 Dec. 1938.
- ⁴⁶ The Federal Union of democratic states was launched in November 1938. By June 1940, it had recruited 12,000 members and had 225 branches throughout the country.
- ⁴⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 Feb. 1941. At a CLNU meeting on the topic of the Federal Union, Mr. A. G. Dye said that he saw no necessity for one as the Covenant of the League would be quite adequate for the solution of post-war problems, if properly applied and enforced.
- ⁴⁸ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 13 Apr. 1940.

⁴⁹ Gloucestershire Archives, D14660/1/1/3 Cheltenham UNA Branch minutes 1977-79. AGM minutes for 23 Jun. 1977 mention that Barbara led a discussion group on UNCTAD IV (Fourth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development held between 5 and 31 May 1976, in Nairobi, Kenya).

⁵⁰ BTA, Box 6. Undated letter (16 Nov. – year not given).

⁵¹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 4 Oct. 1946.

⁵² *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 3 Jul. 1937. On this occasion Barbara wrote and produced their performance. However, in the 1930s the group regularly accompanied Barbara, providing entertainment when she addressed meetings of the Labour Party, the WILPF, at various charity events and at Unitarian Church fetes.

⁵³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 20 Feb. 1939.

⁵⁴ ancestry.co.uk. 1939 Register. Margaret is recorded as a short-hand typist and clerk. Laurie is a skilled workman in the GPO Engineering Department, Telecommunications Installation. They married at Bayshill Church in Oct 1940.

⁵⁵ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 Jul. 1945. *Gloucestershire Echo*, 5 Feb. 1946. *Gloucestershire Echo*, 2 Aug. 1947.

⁵⁶ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 24 Jun. 1949. Mayor Alderman Smith congratulated the committee and claimed that more was being done in Gloucestershire to provide clubs for old people than any other county in England.

⁵⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 28 Jul. 1949. The meals were provided by the Civic Restaurant at a charge 1s. 4d. a head. The charge to the recipient is 10d. and the Borough Council subsidises the meals at a rate of 6d. per head.

⁵⁸ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 25 Jun. 1942

⁵⁹ *The Inquirer*, 11 Jul. 1981. Barbara Thomas' obituary by Rev. Dudley Richards. When Barbara and her mother first arrived in the town, they took up residence at 9 Lansdown

Crescent. Barbara moved to 14 Rotunda Terrace in 1930 and her last address at the time of her death was 2 Rowanfield Road. The comment here most likely refers to the latter address.

⁶⁰ *The Inquirer*, 30 May 1981. Letter to the editor from Stella Pudles (nee Eldridge). It is not clear how Stella and Barbara first met but in August 1932 and May 1933 Stella Eldridge B. A. (a preacher at Richmond Free Church) led services at Bayshill Church.

Adrian Courtenay first studied at Oxford University, researched his MPhil with the Open University and has recently completed a PhD from the University of Birmingham. The subject of his thesis was ‘The LNU in Cheltenham – a study of a local branch’. Much of the substance of this article is drawn from sections of the thesis which consider the role of women within the LNU.