

Catherine Marshall

Jo Vellacott



Jo Vellacott's latest book, Living and Learning in Peace and War, is a memoir of the first 25 years of her long life.

A plaque commemorating the suffragist and pacifist Catherine Marshall was unveiled at Hawse End in England's Lake District on 13 October 2018. Her biographer, Jo Vellacott, sent this message from Canada.

It is a joy to be with you in spirit as you gather to unveil the plaque to Catherine Marshall at Hawse End. As far as I know, I never met Catherine, but she has played a very large role in my life.

By the time Catherine died, she was almost unremembered as a public figure. There was no interest in her papers, and she left them piled in hampers in a shed here at Hawse End. Later, they were rescued by the good sense of the Warden of the Education Centre, and that of the newly appointed Cumberland County Archivist, Bruce Jones. Bruce told me that he took the papers away because they had some interest as an archive of a Cumberland family of note, but that what had also intrigued him and settled the deal was letters he saw 'sticking out here and there' that carried signatures of noteworthy politicians of recent history. Not for Catherine herself. Who knew or wanted to know anything about her?

For that matter, Catherine was only of secondary interest to me, too. I knew only of her connection with Bertrand Russell and the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF). I had come to England with a secret hope of finding a hidden archive of the NCF. (None had been, nor has been found.) Be careful what you wish for! Here I was, faced with forty boxes of unsorted material, containing a disorganized archive of the NCF, another of the non-militant suffrage movement – also of little interest at the time – and much more.

Sorting the papers – there was no one else to do it – took up years of my research life, and much of the grant money I was blessed with. But I have been well rewarded by the excitement of discovery, of finding material that flew in the face of accepted wisdom, of getting to know Catherine and some of her closest friends better than I could have hoped for. One of my best research times was when I spent the summer months in 1969 in Carlisle, with my young daughter and her partner, all living on a single Canada Council research grant, and having a good time while working hard together.

My thesis, and my first book, became a detailed account of the No Conscription Fellowship in the First World War and of Bertrand Russell's leadership in it. Later, as I followed Catherine's activities for peace and women's rights, I spent time in a number of collections in London and Manchester, in Colorado, South Carolina, France, Amsterdam, Pennsylvania. I have also had generous help from many owners of private collections and from the Marshall family itself. So, thank you, Catherine, for giving me opportunities that I could never have had without you.

One of the biggest joys of my life has been the discovery that my books are actually read by historians in Britain and respected by some, many of those present today among them. It is a joy, too, to get to know Simon Colbeck, an ardent follower of Catherine, a descendant of her mother's side of the family. And, more recently, the happenstance that led to meeting with Caroline Wilson, who has her own story to tell of Catherine. And it is great pleasure, and a relief, to be working with Lyndsey Jenkins, to whom I am sending my research papers to continue my work on Catherine, with my blessing.

Most of what I have written here is about my personal experience of getting to know Catherine. The real message of her life, and the importance of her work, is to reveal the role of peaceful means in making change for the better. Honour those who converted Members of Parliament, one by one, to support of the women's franchise; honour those who opposed the First World War, that meaningless bloodbath; honour those who tried and failed to embody clauses in the Treaty of Versailles that might have made the Second World War less inevitable. Always look for a peaceful route, and question those who tell you it won't work. How well do you think methods of violence have worked?