

Jo Vellacott

1922-2019

Jo Vellacott, who died in February in Toronto aged 96, was a pioneer in the study of women's history, drawing particular attention to the intersection between the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and resistance to the First World War.

Born in Plymouth, Devon, Jo was the youngest of the three children of Harold Vellacott, a surgeon, and Josephine (née Semphill), a nurse. She boarded at Downe House school in Berkshire where a formative influence was Quaker history teacher, Jean Rowntree. On graduating from Oxford University in 1943, Jo worked as an aircraft mechanic in the Women's Royal Naval Service during the Second World War.

After the war, Jo applied for work through the intriguingly titled 'Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women' and was appointed to teach English in South Africa. There she met Peter Newberry, a medical student who had been a South African Air Force pilot. They married in 1949 and moved in 1953 to the UK, before emigrating in 1955, with their three children, to Canada when Peter was appointed as a medic in the Canadian Air Force. Moving with Peter's various postings, Jo combined family life with employment as a schoolteacher and as a lecturer in history and women's studies at different universities as the family moved around the country, living in Ottawa, the Yukon, Edmonton, London (Ontario) and Toronto. She gained a history PhD from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1978.

Although Jo lived in Canada for the rest of her life, her work on the early pacifist activism of Bertrand Russell brought her back to the UK on grant-funded research projects from the 1960s, and led to a rediscovery of the role of the Edwardian feminist and First World War pacifist Catherine Marshall. She had hoped to trace the long lost (and still lost) archives of the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF) but instead was pointed to an unsorted hoard of papers at County Archives in Carlisle Castle. They had been recently rescued from a dilapidated shed in the grounds of an outdoor activity centre near Keswick and were known to include correspondence with Russell and many other leading academics, activists and politicians of the

early 20th century. The papers had belonged to the previous owner of the property, Catherine Marshall, who had died almost unknown, in 1961. As Jo discovered, they contained unique records of Marshall's work with the NCF and her earlier pivotal role in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Jo's work on Russell and Marshall coincided with a 1960s resurgence of the peace movement in Britain and a focus on women's history that accompanied 'second wave' feminism. It inspired radical alternative perspectives to the conventional narrative about how the vote for women was won and on women's responses to war, challenging the idea that suffragists and suffragettes alike had overwhelmingly backed the war effort.

Jo's first book, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (1981), and her biography of Marshall, *From Liberal to Labour with Women's Suffrage: The Story of Catherine Marshall* (1993), were both reissued in new editions by Spokesman to mark the centenary of the First World War. Her analysis of the way anti-war suffragism played out from 1914 is most evident in *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: The erosion of democratic suffragism* (2007). The effect of an 'Election Fighting Fund', established from 1912, was that NUWSS funds and organisational support would be given to Labour candidates at the general election due in 1915, in any constituency where the incumbent and/or other candidates of the main (Liberal and Conservative) parties did not pledge support for a women's suffrage measure. As coordinator of the Fund and Parliamentary Secretary of the NUWSS, Catherine Marshall lobbied MPs, party leaders and government ministers as to possible consequences for their political ambitions. Had there been an election in 1915 it is likely that a pro-suffrage House of Commons would have passed a more comprehensive Act than that of 1918. The NUWSS had a growing mass membership, a more democratic structure, a wider feminist agenda, and more working class support and inclusion than the much smaller Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU — suffragettes). In 1915, the NUWSS split over support for the war. 'Pacifist' and internationalist members of the National Committee were a majority but all resigned leaving a more conservative and 'patriotic' faction, led by Millicent Fawcett, in charge. Jo found evidence that NUWSS archives had later been 'weeded' to misrepresent the schism and minimise the contribution of Marshall and others to the pre-war NUWSS campaigns. From the evidence of his own correspondence, Marshall had been personally instrumental in recruiting Russell to the No Conscription Fellowship



Jo Vellacott on her last visit to Britain

cause early in 1916. Jo reveals, in fascinating and forensic detail, the often strained but essential collaboration between them in sustaining the NCF while its younger male leaders, including co-founders Fenner Brockway and Clifford Allen, were imprisoned. Without the illumination of Jo's work, convergent trends between feminism and socialism on the eve of war and the role of women war-resisters after 1914 had been seriously neglected.

A tangible recent outcome is that Catherine Marshall's name and portrait are engraved, with those of other suffragists, on the plinth of Millicent Fawcett's statue, unveiled in Parliament Square, London, in 2018. And a blue plaque commemorating Marshall was unveiled in October that year at her former home at Hawse End near Keswick. Jo was unable to travel by then but contributed an enthusiastic and moving message of greeting that was read on the occasion (see *Spokesman 141*).

As a relative of Catherine Marshall and history teacher, I was fortunate to meet Jo several times on her later visits to Britain. I am grateful for her work in highlighting Catherine, a largely forgotten heroine of first-wave feminism and war resistance who had died long before I knew of her. In person Jo was unfailingly generous and patient in her support for those who shared her wide interests and

determined in her conscientious pursuit of truth. A commitment to progressive ideals infuses her writing without distracting from rigorous attention to detail in presenting evidence and evaluating its sources. Humane insights with a spirit of tolerance and compassion can be found even when her protagonists least appear to deserve it. Her intellect was undimmed by declining energy in the last months of her illness with pancreatic cancer.

Jo, who became a Quaker in her 40s, was able to complete a fascinating account of her own early life, *Living and Learning in Peace and War*, published by Spokesman in 2017. She would have wished to complete a second volume of her biography of Marshall (the first takes her story only to the outbreak of World War One) but this task has been left to Lyndsey Jenkins with a comprehensive foundation of notes and drafts that Jo has passed on.

Jo's marriage to Peter ended in divorce in 1979. She is survived by their children, Mary, Soo and Douglas, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Simon Colbeck



Catherine Marshall on the plinth of Millicent Fawcett's statue