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Agnes Johnston Dollan (1887–1966): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/54395

Dollan [*née* Moir], Agnes Johnston, Lady Dollan (1887–1966), suffragette and socialist, was born on 16 August 1887 at Springburn Road, Glasgow, one of eleven children of Henry Moir, a blacksmith, and his wife, Annie Wilkinson. Forced by family poverty to leave her local elementary school at the age of eleven, she worked briefly in a factory before becoming a telephone operator. The discrimination suffered by her fellow employees inspired her to campaign for feminist and trade union rights. As a teenager she became involved with the Women's Labour League, which sought to improve female working conditions and wages, and she fought alongside Mary Reid Macarthur, a prominent trade unionist, to organize female post-office employees into a single trade union.

During the 1900s Agnes Moir's political and ideological commitments grew. She joined the Women's Social and Political Union, formed in 1903 to secure the vote for women over the age of twenty-one, and strongly favoured the Pankhursts' controversial militant campaigning tactics. Her work with the Glasgow Socialist Sunday School demonstrated both a belief in socialism and a rejection of her staunch protestant upbringing as exemplified in her father's membership of the Orange lodge. Consequently she came into contact with members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which she joined about 1905.

On 20 September 1912 Agnes married [Patrick Joseph Dollan \(1885–1963\)](#), whom she had met a year earlier through meetings of the Clarion Scouts. Son of James Dollan, an Irish miner, Dollan was at that time working as a journalist and ILP propagandist on Tom Johnston's socialist weekly paper, *Forward*. Their relationship was to serve for years as a model partnership founded on a mutual commitment to socialism and to the Scottish labour movement. Their only child, James, born in 1913, was the first pupil in his school to be exempted from religious instruction and by the age of twelve regularly attended socialist Sunday school meetings. He was to become a successful journalist.

During the First World War the Dollans channelled their beliefs into intense, and confrontational, political activity. Strident pacifists, they formed part of a small group of anti-war protesters in Glasgow. Agnes Dollan campaigned in particular to galvanize women's natural hostility to a conflict in which, as she later put it, 'their sons are consumed as common fodder' (Corr and Knox, 90). In tandem with her suffragette friend [Helen Crawford](#), she organized anti-war demonstrations at Glasgow Green in 1914 and established a Glasgow branch of the Women's International League in 1915. Both women travelled widely throughout Scotland to disseminate the league's principles, capitalizing on their highly tuned oratorical skills. In mid-1916 they helped to form the Women's Peace Crusade, which by the following year had grown into a national movement. Dollan also played a significant role in the Glasgow rent strikes during 1915. As treasurer of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association

she headed the campaign, backed largely by housewives, against the council's rent increases; its stubborn resistance prompted the government's intervention and the Rent Restriction Act in late 1915. Despite this Dollan continued to protest against high rents and was jailed briefly in 1917, at the same time that her husband was ensconced in Wormwood Scrubs in London as a conscientious objector.

With the arrival of peace Agnes Dollan plunged more deeply into municipal and provincial politics. From 1918 until the 1930s she served on a variety of bodies, furthering both Patrick Dollan's and her own political careers. Between 1918 and 1921 she was a leading advocate of improved child care, and of medical and health facilities on behalf of Glasgow education authority. In 1921 she was elected to Glasgow town council where, alongside her husband, she fought for a Labour majority and for municipal control of housing, transport, and health. In 1922 she began a six-year stint as a member of the Labour Party's executive committee, and in the 1924 general election she stood (unsuccessfully) as the first female candidate for Dumfriesshire. Following a short period in the political wilderness in the early 1930s, owing mainly to ill health, she resumed her seat on the Labour Party national executive and opposed—but could do little to prevent—the ILP's disaffiliation in July 1932. This led to her being appointed in 1933 as first president of the women's council of the Scottish Socialist Party, which Patrick Dollan had founded as an alternative to the ILP and which remained in existence until it merged with the Labour Party in 1940.

Agnes Dollan's reaction to the growing international tensions of the 1930s mirrored that of many pacifists. At a Labour Party women's conference in 1933 she appealed for united female opposition to warfare. In early 1938 she went further and professed that fascist militarism was the creation of British toryism and capitalistic aggression. A year later, however, like her husband she had transformed her views and become a supporter of rearmament and the war effort. 'It was all very well to theorise under normal conditions but we were not living under such conditions today', she told a Scottish women's Labour Party conference in February 1939. 'We were facing a crisis which might mean general mobilisation' (Corr and Knox, 91). During the war her proven talents as an organizer and propagandist were much in demand—not least by Patrick Dollan, whose position as lord provost of Glasgow included responsibility for civil defence. She also played an integral part in the women's volunteer service. For these services to the community she was appointed MBE in 1946; her husband received a knighthood.

As a mark of her new-found respectability and her knowledge of Scottish issues, Lady Dollan was appointed to the royal commission on Scottish affairs in 1953–4. Her support for a limited amount of administrative devolution echoed the Labour Party's line of policy. Through the Scottish committee she also helped to organize Scotland's contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain, and she sat as a governor of Hutchison's grammar school between 1948 and 1955.

In her later years Lady Dollan's views on religion and war underwent radical change. Possibly affected by the atrocities committed during the Second World War, she became involved with the Moral Re-Armament movement, which preached anti-communism and religious puritanism. This corresponded with her conversion from 'free thinking' to Catholicism, which was largely influenced by her husband's taking

the same route after a long period as a lapsed Catholic and an agnostic. Patrick Dollan died in 1963 after a long illness, nursed by Agnes, who was by that time retired.

Some contemporaries have argued that for all her strong attachment to feminism throughout her life, Agnes Dollan saw her role principally as that of a supporter of her husband's career and that this seriously undermined her own political development. Unlike the more pragmatic Patrick, Agnes was an idealistic socialist whose frustration with the failure to create pure socialism perhaps made her more reactionary in old age. Despite her links with Moral Re-Armament, however, she remained an outstanding advocate of socialism and feminism. Her involvement with the Labour Party from its earliest days made her a national figure and an acknowledged expert on housing, welfare, and education; and she displayed a rare ability as an organizer and public speaker, talents which added considerably to her widespread popularity within the Scottish labour movement.

Agnes Dollan died aged seventy-eight from cardiac failure on 16 July 1966 at Victoria Infirmary, Glasgow. Among those who attended her funeral were the lord provost of Glasgow and several prominent Labour MPs.

Helen Corr

Sources

H. Corr and W. Knox, 'Dollan, Patrick Joseph', *Scottish labour leaders, 1918–39: a biographical dictionary*, ed. W. Knox (1984) · b. cert. · d. cert. · H. McShane and J. Smith, *Harry McShane: no mean fighter* (1978)

Wealth at death

£8148 18s. 4d.: confirmation, 25 Aug 1966, NA Scot., SC 36/48/1042/258