

## Gordon (Marjoribanks), Dame Ishbel Maria

by Patrick Maume

Gordon (Marjoribanks), Dame Ishbel Maria (1857–1939), marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, philanthropist, was born 14 March 1857 in London, daughter of Dudley Marjoribanks, 1st Baron Tweedmouth, banker and liberal MP, and his wife, Isobel Marjoribanks (née Hogg), who belonged to the Lisburn family of the viscounts Hailsham. Childhood visits to the family's country house in Inverness-shire gave Ishbel a strong sense of her Scottish roots and an abiding romantic Celticism. She was privately educated by tutors (including Swiss governesses, who taught her fluency in German and French) and wished to attend Girton College, Cambridge, but this was vetoed by her father. Tweedmouth was an irascible man – her daughter recalled that Ishbel ‘inherited her father's strong passions but bridled them’ – and Ishbel identified strongly with her mother. At the age of eleven she acquired a deep and lasting admiration for W. E. Gladstone (because he spoke to her as a friend and without condescension).

From February 1871 she acquired a confidant: John Campbell Gordon (qv), 7th earl of Aberdeen, grandson of a prime minister, was nervous, introspective, and puritanical (traits encouraged by the early death of his depressive father and his unexpected succession in 1872 to the title after one brother drowned and another committed suicide). In the ensuing years Gordon continued to regard her as an amusing child-friend, while she fell in love with him. After she made her feelings plain, they were married on 7 November 1877. They had three sons and two daughters (one of whom died in infancy). The ebullient Ishbel was clearly the dominant partner; she assumed the running of the estate, since her husband took little interest in business matters, and she devoted much attention to relieving his recurring bouts of depression.

In 1879 Ishbel developed a strong evangelical commitment and began to keep a diary. She took a deep interest in religiously inspired social work (which included assisting Gladstone's efforts to reclaim London prostitutes). This increased after 1884 when the Aberdeens came under the influence of Henry Drummond (1851–97), a Free Church of Scotland theologian, whose ‘evolutionary theology’ dispensed with biblical literalism and presented love (expressed in part through social reform) rather than dogma as central to Christianity. One of Ishbel's biographers, Doris French, suggests that Ishbel and Drummond were lovers; this highly speculative view discounts the emotionalism of late-Victorian religious conversation. (The Aberdeens preserved a notable sexual puritanism. Lord Aberdeen was a long-serving president of the pro-censorship National Vigilance Association – his outspoken endorsement of a catholic-dominated pro-censorship campaign in Ireland in 1911 helped to delay publication of *Dubliners* by James Joyce (qv).) Ishbel's activities included the provision of education and training for servants; this (and her

characteristic disregard for protocol) gave rise to rumours that the Aberdeens treated their servants as equals, which may have inspired J. M. Barrie's play 'The admirable Crichton', though Barrie denied that he had meant to satirise the Aberdeens.

Encouraged by Ishbel, Aberdeen left the conservative party for the liberals in 1879 over his opposition to Disraeli's war policy. Gladstone regularly stayed at their principal residence, Haddo House in Aberdeenshire, and Aberdeen was a popular, hospitable, and free-spending high commissioner of the Church of Scotland, 1881–5. On 5 February 1886 Gladstone appointed Aberdeen lord lieutenant of Ireland; although Ishbel had previously sworn never to set foot in Ireland and their initial reception was lukewarm, the Aberdeens won considerable popularity through their enthusiasm for home rule and disregard for viceregal protocol. Soon after their arrival they attended a famine relief meeting organised by T. D. Sullivan (qv), lord mayor of Dublin, at which Aberdeen shook the hand of the nationalist Michael Davitt (qv); they toured the country, receiving an enthusiastic reception, and Ishbel set about encouraging Irish craft industries (promoted locally by various landed families and catholic convents). On 1 May 1886 she launched the Irish Home Industries Association at a crafts exhibition which she had organised. The Aberdeens' departure on 3 August 1886 after the fall of Gladstone's government was marked by a great popular demonstration. Ishbel continued to visit Ireland regularly to promote the Industries Association and to help market Irish goods abroad. Her marketing efforts culminated in the organisation of a successful Irish model village at the Chicago World Fair of 1893.

The Aberdeens expected to return to the viceroyalty in the next Gladstone government; in 1892, however, John Morley (qv), the chief secretary, vetoed a reappointment to ensure his own undivided control of the Irish administration, and Aberdeen became governor-general of Canada (1893–8). The Aberdeens had visited Canada in 1890, an event commemorated in Ishbel's book *Through Canada with a Kodak* (1893). During their time in Canada, Ishbel founded the Victorian Order of Nurses to mark Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee (1897). In 1893 she was elected president of the nascent International Congress of Women, a federation of women's organisations; in this role (1893–9 and 1904–36) she played a major part in building up its international network (and rebuilding it after the first world war). She was also president of the Women's Liberal Federation, 1901–6, which split over her support for women's suffrage.

At the end of 1905 Aberdeen was reappointed lord lieutenant by the new liberal government and Ishbel returned to her role in encouraging charitable work and Irish craft industries. Irish attitudes to these activities were by now considerably more equivocal than in 1886. The Irish aristocracy, predominantly unionist, avoided the viceroy with his home rule views. The Aberdeens responded by extending invitations to upwardly mobile catholic professionals and business people, attracting further denunciations from unionist snobs and from nationalists who accused them of 'political souperism'; the author and nationalist Alice Milligan (qv) compared Ishbel to

the soul-purchasing demons in 'The Countess Cathleen' by W. B. Yeats (qv). Ishbel saw her task as uniting Irish factions for the common good and was bemused by the reluctance of even moderate nationalists to identify too closely with the Castle.

Throughout their second term the Aberdeens were extensively ridiculed by both unionists and nationalists. This reflected a stereotypical image of them as Scots misers in contrast to their free-spending predecessor, Lord Dudley (qv); in fact the Aberdeens' activities cut heavily into their personal income – depleted by agricultural depression – as well as the earl's official salary, and her descendants blamed Ishbel's charitable works for dissipating the family fortune. The Aberdeens suffered from the perceived dominance within the marriage of Lady Aberdeen (who was physically larger than her husband), her interference in official business to procure appointments for sometimes dubious protégés, and the unwillingness of advanced nationalists and socialists to accept favours from a British Lady Bountiful. Opponents also spread rumours linking their eldest son, Lord Haddo, to the theft in 1907 of the Irish crown jewels. (Haddo, an epileptic, was a disappointment to his mother; she married him off to a widow considerably older than himself as she believed it undesirable for him to have children.)

Lady Aberdeen was particularly associated with an anti-tuberculosis campaign spearheaded by the Women's National Health Association (WNHA), which she launched at the Dublin International Exhibition in 1907, and in connection with which she edited a three-volume lecture collection, *Ireland's fight against tuberculosis* (1908). Two WNHA vans toured Ireland giving information on how to prevent and treat tuberculosis, and Ishbel raised funds in Britain and America to build Peamount sanatorium (which opened in 1912). Some nationalists attacked the campaign as being marked by social condescension and questioned the motives behind it. Brian O'Higgins (qv) produced vitriolic verse satires on 'Lady Microbe', while Arthur Griffith (qv) claimed that the enterprise was a British plot to kill Irish exports by representing them as plague-stricken.

In 1911 the Aberdeens met the labour leader James Larkin (qv) in a bid to promote arbitration of labour disputes. This initiative (apparently reflecting Ishbel's belief in the use of personal influence to promote goodwill) had little effect; William Martin Murphy (qv) and his allies regarded it as official appeasement, Griffith cited it as proof that Larkin was a British agent, Larkinites continued to denounce the Aberdeens with the rest of the social establishment, and unionists sneered: 'they split the ha'penny buns in two when Larkin comes to tea' (Keane, 208). A civic exhibition in 1914 devised by the Scottish urbanist Patrick Geddes and organised by Ishbel to promote the redevelopment of Dublin under home rule closed prematurely because of the outbreak of the first world war.

At the beginning of 1915 Aberdeen was removed from the lord lieutenancy, his departure hastened by the revelation that Ishbel had sent a private letter to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal* about the need to guard against unionist dominance of

the Irish Red Cross. (Unionists accused her of politicising the Red Cross, while separatists claimed that this proved the *Freeman's Journal* was secretly controlled by the government.) John Redmond (qv) unsuccessfully opposed their removal because of their symbolic value as advocates of home rule. As a consolation Aberdeen was made a marquess. The proposed title 'marquess of Aberdeen and Tara' provoked protests from many unionists and nationalists as a presumptuous claim to the seat of Ireland's ancient kings; Aberdeen compromised by changing 'Tara' to 'Temair'. Aberdeen served again as lord high commissioner to the Church of Scotland in 1915, after which the couple spent much of the first world war in Aberdeen raising funds for Peamount.

Faced with severe financial problems, the Aberdeens handed over a diminished estate to Lord Haddo in 1920 and retired to a dower house at Cromar. They co-authored two anodyne memoirs, *We twa* (1925) and *More cracks with we twa* (1929); *Musings of a Scottish granny* (1936) by Ishbel alone largely reprises material from the earlier books. On her husband's death in 1934 Ishbel had to give up Cromar and move into a house in Aberdeen. She was made GBE in 1931 and remained active in the liberal party and in women's causes (presenting a petition for women's ordination to the general assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1931). In the later 1930s she developed an interest in spiritualism; her last major initiative was to encourage a peace mission to Hitler in 1937, undertaken by her fellow spiritualist, the Canadian prime minister Mackenzie King (though she despaired of peace after Munich and the annexation of Czechoslovakia). To the end of her life she regularly revisited Ireland to supervise and raise funds for Peamount sanatorium. She died 18 April 1939 at Aberdeen of heart failure.

Although previous vicereines had engaged in charitable work, Lady Aberdeen's activities were unprecedented in their scale and the extent of her personal involvement; they can be seen both as an expression of personal concern and as an attempt to transform the vicereignty into a 'welfare monarchy', paralleling the contemporary British development of charitable endeavours as a prime *raison d'être* for a royal family whose political role was declining. Her late-Victorian sentimental adherence to *noblesse oblige* can seem as grating to later generations as it did to many contemporaries, and it is understandable that she was denounced as embodying a suffocatingly maternalist *ancien regime*; but a recent Irish biographer discovered that gratitude for her kindness and concern survived among the descendants of many of her local beneficiaries and associates. Her achievements in healthcare, the encouragement of craft industries, and the promotion of women's role in society were exaggerated by her associates but were none the less genuine. A collection of Ishbel Aberdeen's papers, including her surviving diaries, is held at Haddo House. The records of the WNHA are kept at Peamount Hospital.

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Marquess and Marchioness of Aberdeen, *We twa* (1925); eid., *More cracks with we twa* (1929); Ishbel, Marchioness of Aberdeen, *Musings of a Scottish granny* (1936); *Wolfe Tone Annual* (1949–50); Marjorie Pentland, *A bonnie fechter: the life of Ishbel Marjoribanks, marchioness of Aberdeen* (1952); Doris French, *Ishbel and the empire: a biography of Lady Aberdeen* (1988); Maureen Keane, *Ishbel: Lady Aberdeen in Ireland* (1999); Greta Jones (ed.), *'Captain of all these men of death': the history of tuberculosis in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland* (2001)

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