

The feisty women who made Plan International: writing women back into our history

By Florence Kiff

Ahead of Plan International's 80th anniversary on 20 March, global brand manager Florence Kiff remembers the courageous women who played an integral part in the organisation's history.

We've all heard of our founding fathers: the British journalist John Langdon-Davies, the intrepid British refugee worker Eric Muggeridge and the charismatic and well-connected American Nick (Barton) Carter.

In April 1937, exactly eighty years ago, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, we are told these three men joined forces to create the 'Foster Parents Scheme for Children in Spain' to support orphaned and refugee children fleeing persecution during the war.

But there are others we rarely hear of: the trailblazing women who played equally critical roles in building the Plan International we have today. These include Esme Odgers, the feisty young Australian communist who helped set up the first children's homes on the French-Spanish border; Katharine Marjory Ramsay (also known as the Duchess of Athol) and Scotland's first female member of parliament who provided the first concrete political and financial support to 'the plan'; Edna Blue, who used the power of marketing to raise awareness of the plight of Spain's children, and Anna Freud who played a critical role in understanding the psychological impact of war on children, working with the children in our care in London through the Hampstead Child Therapy Clinic in 1939.

If you haven't heard of them it's no real surprise. It's an inconvenient truth that while women make up 50 per cent of the population, they only make up 0.5 per cent of recorded history. Our history has harnessed the voices, dreams, regrets, successes, failures and aspirations of men – and has detailed their actions in those very areas they have dominated – war, diplomacy, politics, trade and administration.

Women's' pasts have been buried in the mire of our common past, generally edited out of history, a narrative lost to our collective memory. And worse still, where women are mentioned, they are usually portrayed in sex-stereotypical roles as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, mistresses and lovers or if they have been instrumental to a man's rise or fall.

Today, as social activists and campaigners for women's rights, striving for deep-rooted equality for girls and women, it is now our job to fill the gaps in our organisational history, to build women back into our historical narrative and to shine a light on their actions and contributions: their bravery, intelligence, compassion and their part in building a more just world.

A perfect example is Esme Odgers, one of our young founding pioneers and a little-known Australian humanitarian activist. Esme was intelligent, resolute, focused and a committed campaigner to relieve the oppression of the poor. From a young age, she developed an undying commitment to women's rights and as a teenager joined the Young Communist's League, the youth organisation of the Australian Communist Party.

As the Spanish Civil War began to take root in 1936, Esme became increasingly moved by the plight of the Spanish people and could no longer tolerate watching the destruction from afar. Hitler had all

but obliterated the German Communist Party and she was concerned that other European nations would follow Germany's example.

Fired on by her comrades, she resolved to travel to Spain to protect and promote the communist cause and be part of the drive for global change. Her passport application states that she was travelling to England to attend the King George VI's coronation!

In February 1937, she set sail for Europe with the then Secretary General of the Australian Communist Party, with whom, incidentally, she was having an affair, so history tells us. On her arrival in Spain, she connected with other like-minded activists and didn't take long to team up with John, Eric and Nick who had planted the first seeds of 'a plan'.

Donors (or 'foster parents'), mostly from the UK, were being approached to sponsor a child in need in Spain with 'a shilling a day' to fund a comprehensive, home-like environment for their 'sponsored' child, with food, education and protection. As the funds started trickling in, John, Eric, Nick and Esme began setting up children's homes or colonies for over 200 children at Puigcerda in the Pyrenees Mountains on the French-Spanish border. Using these funds, Esme was able to organise deliveries to the children and supported them as best she could in extremely difficult circumstances.

But she often faced huge financial strain, and at one point was forced to relocate herself and all the children in her care to Biarritz, another part of France. Never daunted, she continued to appeal to people everywhere for support, including in her local Australian papers where she pleaded 'for all the assistance that can be given, to enable those who are interested in the welfare of the women and children to be helped in this time of dire need'. She wrote up case histories for each of the children, arranged photos and translations for donors, and as such, became our first sponsorship manager. Hundreds of children owe their lives to her and her efforts during those years.

Just before the German invasion of France in 1940, she evacuated to London and five years later left for Venezuela where she settled with her Spanish husband and her child. There has been virtually no trace of her since then – lost again to history.

Another name drowned by history is that of our original donor and supporter - Katharine Marjory Ramsay, the Duchess of Athol, and Scotland's first female parliamentarian. Without her deep insight, engagement and political will, 'the plan' would have been no more than a pipe dream. Soon after being approached by John Langdon-Davies, she arranged for funds from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief to be allocated for the 'Foster Parent Scheme for Children in Spain'.

This provided the necessary initial food, shelter, clothing and education for thousands of orphaned children and refugees to get the scheme off the ground. Through the Basque Children's Committee, which she chaired, she was also able to arrange for 4,000 Basque children to be evacuated from Santander to England in May 1937. And it was her original call for volunteers in September 1936 to deliver a convoy of trucks to Spain to support the relief effort in Spain that originally attracted Eric Muggeridge to the plight of the refugee children.

These intrepid women should be household names at Plan International, but simply aren't. So many women like her should have been recognised for their brilliance and perseverance, but simply haven't. As we navigate through our new era of social justice for women and girls across all of our work, let's actively look out for women's stories. Let's write them up accurately, in detail and without bias, and

ensure they are preserved in our collective memory. No longer will we allow their stories be buried in the dust of time and down the dark crevices of our complex past.

Let's start to document our genuine pasts, recognise past injustices and champion the voices of those women who every day, are working with us for a more just world.



Esme Odgers surrounded by Spanish refugee children in one of our original colonies near Biarritz, France. [Photo: Robert Capa]



Esme Odgers (right) and Daniel Argote (centre) checking the list of new arrivals at Bayonne Railways Station in Biarritz, France. (Photo: Robert Capa)