

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



Mary Agnes Wilson (1841–1930)

Early Life

Mary Agnes was born in St Petersburg, the youngest child of Bernard and Elizabeth Whishaw. Bernard (1779 – 1868) ran a successful trading business, and he and his wife Elizabeth (1796 – 1879) were important members of the expatriot community in Russia, with connections and rumours of blood ties with the Russian royal family. They moved to Cheltenham in about 1850 where it seems Elizabeth Whishaw went to great lengths to make her mark on Cheltenham Society.

Interests

Mary Agnes was an energetic and forthright child and grew up to be a good horse rider and keen gardener. She enjoyed painting and reading theological books, and became a respected authority on the breeding of poultry, the first to import and breed Plymouth Rocks from America and the author of an authoritative book the *ABC of Poultry*.

She rented farms to pursue these and other agricultural interests firstly at Sunnymede, near Up Hatherley, then later at The Crippetts, Leckhampton. These both became very important places of peace and pleasure to all her family but especially her son Edward Adrian, the Antarctic explorer.

Marriage and Family life

Mary Agnes met Edward Thomas Wilson, a doctor and pioneer photographer, at society events in Cheltenham. They married in 1866 and set up home in 6 (now 91) Montpellier Terrace, moving to a larger house, Westal, in Montpellier Parade in 1874, when their family outgrew their first property. They had ten children, though as was sadly common at the time, Jessica and Glwadys did not survive childhood, and Nellie died as a young woman. Mary and Edward were dedicated parents, anxious to see their children



Portrait of Mary Agnes Wilson by Alfred Soord, 1913.

learn and develop, and not necessarily from the standard textbook of the time! It was Mary who bought Edward Adrian drawing classes when he was a boy - the only art lessons he ever received outside of school.

Influence on her Family

Mary Agnes was the spiritual and moral guide for the family. She had been brought up in the hey day of evangelical preaching in Cheltenham and had a strong faith in God. She was always happy to discuss theological matters with her children, and supported her son Jim in his calling to be a church of England priest; and encouraged Edward Adrian to consider the 'teaching power of sickness' rather than just looking on medicine as a science, as his father was inclined to do.



Photograph of Mary Agnes sewing for the war effort

First World War

Mary Agnes Wilson, like every other women, had relatives and friends on the Western Front. She had lost her son Edward Adrian to the Antarctic in 1913, just the year before war was declared. Her oldest son, Bernard, volunteered as an officer in the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and her younger son Jim, went with a PALS group from Wolverhampton to serve as their Padre. She supported them by writing letters nearly every day, and arranged for parcels of 'comforts' - socks, mufflers, balaclavas, and mittens to be sent out to their men. She spent many hours knitting and sewing for her own men folk but also for the Red Cross war effort.

She was a committee member of the Cheltenham branch of the Red Cross, hosting meetings at Westal as well as going to meetings at the Town Hall, and the Municipal offices. Their aim was to fundraise for the local Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) hospitals, as well as encourage the drive to provide 'comforts' for the troops, bandages and medical supplies;

and provide training for nurses. Mary Wilson hosted fetes and fairs at Westal, and promoted concerts and theatre performances for the Red Cross. She also put her energy into fundraising for the Cheltenham bed for the Lord Mayor Treloar Cripples Hospital.

Final years

Mary Agnes supported and nursed her husband who was struggling with ill health throughout the war – he had never recovered from the shock of hearing of Edward Adrian's death – dying in spring 1918. She herself lived in Cheltenham, staying in Westal, until her own death in 1930.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>