

ABADAM, ALICE (1856 - 1940), campaigner for women's rights

Name: Alice Abadam
Date of birth: 1856
Date of death: 1940
Partner: Alice Vowe Johnson
Parent: Edward Abadam
Parent: Louisa Abadam (née Taylor)
Gender: Female
Occupation: campaigner for women's rights
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Activism
Author: Mary Thorley

Alice Abadam was born in London on 2 January 1856, the seventh and youngest child of Edward Abadam (formerly Adams, 1810-1875) and his wife Louisa (née Taylor, 1828-1886). Alice grew up at Middleton Hall (now the National Botanic Gardens of Wales) which had been bought by her paternal grandfather, Edward Hamlin Adams, in 1824 on his return from Jamaica where the family had had slave-owning interests for several generations. Alice's father held radical views and adopted the family name Abadam based on the Welsh patronymic formula when he came to Wales in 1842. The authoress Violet Paget ('Vernon Lee', 1856-1935) was Alice's cousin, the daughter of one of her father's sisters. The library in Middleton Hall was home to a large collection of books in several languages and Alice benefitted from a broad education given at home by tutors and governesses, which resulted in her being multilingual, an accomplished musician and a talented artist.

By 1886, following the death of her parents, Abadam had moved into the town of Carmarthen where she made her home for the next eighteen years in a substantial property in Picton Terrace. She had converted to Catholicism by this time and her faith was to become one of her deepest interests for the rest of her life. The house was within a short walking distance of St Mary's Church and she became organist and choirmaster (sic) there, frequently making generous gifts and taking part in charitable events. Two years later, as well as coming second in a shooting competition, she won the piano competition at the Blaenau Ffestiniog National Eisteddfod, playing a Chopin nocturne and a prelude and fugue by Bach. Her prize of two guineas was presented to her by the judge on that occasion, **Dr Joseph Parry**.

In 1901, Dr Alice Vowe Johnson (1869-1938), who was to become Alice Abadam's partner for the rest of their lives, arrived in the town to take up a post at the Three Counties Asylum. Together, they played a major role in establishing the order of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost in Carmarthen, a group of nuns who had been displaced from a convent in Brittany. In 1903 the two Alices left Carmarthen to live in London. Thus, Abadam arrived, aged forty-eight, onto a London scene that was bristling with the activities of suffrage campaigners. She was to become an able and energetic activist for the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society.

Alice Abadam was an accomplished linguist and her archive (deposited in the LSE) contains documents written in English, Welsh, French, German, Classical Greek and Latin. Her personal notes demonstrate her interest in topics such as classical literature, vivisection, parthenogenesis and embryology, the conduct of eisteddfodau, the teachings of the Koran and the doctrines and philosophies of Sanskrit. She had a fascination with the cult of the Virgin Mary which sustained her in the belief that 'male is a temporary agent, she is the eternal principle' and also that 'woman alone is God-like, she alone creates'. She was evidently motivated by her faith and her notes indicate that she was looking for a clear purpose in life. One entry in her notebooks, dated January 1896, reflects on this search, which she interprets as her need to serve God. She writes, 'all that I have is thine. Make me as one of thy hired servants, that I may come and go and speak and act at thy bidding'.

Also in the collection are pamphlets and notes relating to women's suffrage, some authored by Abadam herself, as well as the posters and notices of meetings and rallies at which she was the main speaker. While Alice Vowe Johnson immersed herself in her work as the Medical Officer of Health for Lambeth Poor Law Schools, Abadam became increasingly committed to the suffrage movement and in 1906 she became a member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). However, in September 1907, she was one of nine signatories on a letter sent to Emmeline Pankhurst, which was published in the press, asking that the running of the WSPU be conducted on more democratic lines. This was a request that was ignored with the result that, in the same year, Abadam joined the Freedom League and became involved in the work of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Catholic Suffrage Society. Although now fifty years of age, she was, because of her oratorical talent, in great demand as a speaker and she embarked on a series of extensive lecture tours which took her all over Great Britain and Ireland. In August 1908, she undertook 'a bicycle tour with a Suffragette Caravan Through the North' recording the journey in a series of sketches which demonstrate her artistic ability and wit as well as recording valuable information about the journey.

Between April 1909 and November 1910 she spoke in public meetings in places ranging from Yarmouth to Portsmouth and from Grimsby to Cheltenham, addressing audiences on the subjects of the Conciliation Bill, the underpayment of women, prostitution and the political actions of **Lloyd George**. Although she shared the platform with other speakers (including Elizabeth Garrett Anderson) it is clear that she was seen as an inspirational spokeswoman for the cause who could hold the attention of very large audiences, often ending her speeches with the invocation to, 'believe and do and dare'. In April and May of 1911, she undertook a tour of Scotland which involved her, and some of her fellow suffragists, in speaking at twenty-two venues in major towns and cities.

Abadam's speaking programme continued throughout 1912 and into 1913 with her considerable reputation as an orator going before her. In February 1913 she addressed the 'Great United Demonstration' in which over twenty-five suffrage societies took part. This rally was held in the Queen's Hall, Langham Place, which had a seating capacity of more than two and a half thousand people. April 1913 saw her visiting Ireland where she was described as being:

"one of the greatest forces in the Women's Suffrage Movement, a woman of striking mental gifts and, as has been so aptly said, a 'silver tongued speaker'. Miss Abadam has done yeoman service in building up the cause and bringing it to the forefront of practical politics. She speaks with a conviction born of knowledge acquired on missions of charity amongst the most destitute of women workers, and she has the indisputable right to tell us of the suffering and the sorrow of the downtrodden and politically helpless, for her preparation to voice these things was made at the cost of self-sacrifice and personal service amongst them."
(Irish Citizen, 26 April 1913, p.3)

This report indicates that she had continued with her philanthropic work after her move to London and explains her vigorous championing of the low paid and women who were forced, through poverty, into prostitution. She was also, at this time, writing letters to the leading politicians of the day and producing articles for magazines and pamphlets.

When women over the age of thirty were granted the vote in 1918, Abadam was, in the words of Ryland Wallace, 'fuming' and wrote 'let there be no abject expression of fulsome gratitude'. Insulted by this partial enfranchisement, the sixty-two year Abadam increased her efforts, forming the Feminist League under her own chairmanship and giving, for several years in the 1920s, a series of lectures throughout the autumn and winter. These were held at Mortimer Hall, Upper Regent Street, and subjects included, 'The Psychology of Dress', 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', 'Evolution and Parthenogenesis' and the 'Suppression of the Women Police'. In 1918 she offered herself as a candidate in the General Election representing the Independent Coalition but did not actually stand. Her vigorous campaigning continued until the vote was given to women on the same terms as men in 1928. Following the death of Alice Vowe Johnson in 1938, and the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War, she returned to Carmarthen to her nephew's house at Bryn Myrddin in Abergwili on the outskirts of the town. She died there on 31 March 1940, and was buried, with Vowe Johnson, in St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church.

In 2018, on the centenary of the enfranchisement of women, a Blue Plaque in her memory was unveiled at 26 Picton Terrace, Carmarthen by the head girls of the two local comprehensive schools. In the same year, a Blue Plaque was also unveiled at Middleton Hall by her great-niece Margaret Vaughan.

Author

Mary Thorley

Sources

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Ryland Wallace, *The women's suffrage movement in Wales, 1866-1928* (Cardiff 2009)

Alexandra Hughes-Johnson, 'Abadam, Alice (1856–1940), suffrage activist and women's right's campaigner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

London School of Economics, Women's Library, Suffrage Collection

National Library of Wales, [Welsh Newspapers Online](#)

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Alice Abadam](#)

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