

*In early December last year the Scottish Parliament celebrated the Centenary of its first woman MP, Katharine Murray, Duchess of Atholl.*

Two of our members were at the reception and we have their reports: Carmen Coupland, one of the speakers, daughter of a niña and Koldo Sanz, son of two niños de la guerra.

### **Katharine Murray, Duchess of Atholl: a Century since her Election to Parliament**

6th December 2023, an event organised by John Swinney MSP and his wife, the BBC Scotland reporter, Elizabeth Quigley, to celebrate the centenary of the election to Parliament of Katharine, Duchess of Atholl was held at the Scottish Parliament. She was the first female Scots MP and, of course, remembered by members of the Basque Children of 37 Association UK.

Mr. Swinney chaired the event. His constituency, N. Perthshire, overlaps that of the Duchess, Kinross and W. Perthshire.

He stressed her efforts were driven by humanitarian motives rather than by party politics.

Elizabeth Quigley, although a modern history graduate and former political reporter, knew nothing of the Duchess until she met her husband. Becoming very interested, she made a TV documentary, “The Duchess and the Fuhrer”, a radio documentary, and several TV and radio presentations. Many of us heard her article on the “Red Duchess” recently broadcast on BBC Radio 4’s “Woman’s Hour”.

Paul Ramsay, the Duchess’s great nephew, told of his childhood visits to her and her concern for children, especially the child victims of war. He wondered if such deep concern emanated from her own childlessness.

Amy Gray’s biography of the Duchess began as a “lockdown project”. It centres on her parliamentary and political life and will be published in 2025.

She detailed the Duchess’s adherence to her humanitarian ideals against official government lines, especially her opposition to non-intervention and appeasement. Interventions by Hitler and Mussolini in the Spanish Civil War breached such agreements, strengthening the Duchess’s argument for the evacuation of the Basque children to Britain. Ultimately, her refusal to support policies of non-intervention relating to war in Europe led to the loss of the Conservative whip and a by-election in 1938 where, standing as an Independent, she lost her seat.

As a female MP she needed strong male support: she got this from her husband, Baldwin and Churchill.

Jane Anderson, archivist at the Atholl estate for 35 years, told of the birth of Katharine Ramsay in Alyth to the 2nd wife of Sir James Ramsay 10th Baronet, her childhood, education and adulthood. After completing studies in piano and composition at the Royal College of Music, she returned to Perthshire where she and her mother often entertained at country houses. At one such an event, she met John Stewart-Murray, son of the 7th Duke of Atholl. They married in 1899. A professional soldier, he was often abroad. On visits to him, she witnessed the suffering of the victims of war, especially the children. In 1917, her husband became the 8th Duke and she, the Duchess of Atholl

.In 1923, she was elected to parliament, became the first female minister in the Ministry of Education and developed an interest in foreign affairs, including the rise of fascism in Europe and Franco's insurgency of the elected Spanish government . She and 2 other female MPs went to witness events in Spain. Hearing of the bombing of Guernica on 26th April 1937, she convinced parliament to agree to the evacuation to Britain of children from the area. Despite losing her seat in 1938, her interest in child welfare continued. She was widowed in 1942 and died in 1960."

I outlined the experience of my mother and aunt, typical of those 4,000 Basque children on the Habana."

"They sailed out of Santurce "only for 3 months", wearing their identification hexagons. They camped at Stoneham, moved to a Salvation Army hostel in Brixton, then to a colony in Sutton-on-Hull and ultimately, to "foster-parents" in Sutton. A decade later, thanks to the Red Cross, they were re-united with their parents.

It was my pleasure to stress the gratitude of those Basque children for this humanitarian Duchess in effecting their evacuation from the war.

In the audience were school children, MSPs, members of the Duchess's family and Koldo Sanz who, amazingly, had with him his father's hexagon and luggage labels. "

By Ma Carmen Coupland

### **A Celebration of the Life of Katharine Murray, Duchess of Atholl on the centenary of her election to Parliament and held at the Scottish Parliament on 6 December 2023**

Katharine (Kitty) Murray (1874 – 1960) was in 1923 the first Scottish woman to be elected to Parliament. This was an unlikely development as only ten years before she had been strongly opposed to the suffragettes and their campaign for women to have the vote. She became a junior minister at the Department of Education and took her job seriously despite the opposition of the minister at the time, though on occasion she would go over his head directly to the Prime Minister, a personal friend.

The event was introduced by John Swinney MSP and followed by short talks covering between them all aspects of her life: her great nephew Paul Ramsay on his fond recollections as a child ("She would have been horrified by the present UK government"); the author of a biography of her to be published in April, Amy Gray; the former archivist of Blair Castle, Jane Anderson; the BCA's own Carmen Coupland who described the differing paths of her mother and her sister; and ended by the BBC journalist Elizabeth Quigley who has done her own research.

The impression of Kitty that came from all was of her great concern for children (though she had none herself) and it was this that led to her support to bring the Basque children from Bilbao. She was the chair of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and was able to use her influence with the government to allow a boat-load of children to come to Southampton, though it took the bombing of Guernica to achieve this.

She would study every issue before coming to a conclusion, traveling to many countries as part of her research – she had visited Madrid and other Spanish cities in April 1937. Once she came to a conclusion she would stick to it regardless of personal cost.

She was opposed to both communism and fascism and warned repeatedly against both during the 1930s. Alarmed about the lack of impetus against fascism she resigned her seat in 1938 and stood as an independent but lost narrowly after the Conservatives campaigned strongly against her. One of the criticisms levied against her was that she neglected her constituents by travelling abroad so often.

She continued to talk to anyone of any political persuasion and answered all letters, even the unpleasant ones. She died in 1960 aged 85.

By Koldo Sanz

Elizabeth Quigley's piece for the BBC had be found here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-67576617>