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Ada Nield Chew

David Doughan

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Chew, Ada Nield (1870–1945), labour organizer and suffragist, was born at Hollins, Butt Lane, Audley, Staffordshire, on 28 January 1870, the second child in a family of thirteen of William Nield, brick maker, and his wife, Jane, *née* Hammond. Ada was taken from school at the age of eleven to help look after the family, especially her younger sister May, who was an epileptic and in 1920 was committed to the Cheshire County Asylum, where she died in the 1920s.

In 1881 the Nield family moved briefly to Malvern, Worcestershire, where Ada's father farmed, with little success, until 1887. They then moved to Crewe, and Ada worked at a shop in Nantwich. By 1894 she was working at Compton Bros. clothing factory, where she made her first public contribution by writing a number of letters to the *Crewe Chronicle* signed A Crewe Factory Girl. These letters were circumstantially critical of the pay and conditions of factory women, especially compared to those of their male colleagues doing the same work. This resulted in Ada losing her position, and thereupon she became an active member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), being elected in December 1894 to the Nantwich board of poor law guardians. She also contributed to *The Clarion* and the *Labour Leader*, and travelled round Britain speaking for the ILP, particularly in the *Clarion* van; through this activity she met George Chew (1872–1940), another ILP activist, whom she married in 1897. In June 1898 their only child, Doris, was born, and this restricted Ada's activities considerably for the next two years. They settled in Rochdale, where they kept a 'fent' shop (a Lancashire dialect word for remnants of cloth). In 1900 she resumed her career as speaker, and became an organizer for the Women's Trade Union League, in which capacity she travelled widely throughout Britain. She also became involved in the league's Potteries Fund Committee, helping to find and aid victims of lead poisoning in the Potteries, a cause to which she devoted considerable energy well into the 1920s.

In 1903 George Chew gave up the fent shop for a retail business in drapery and footwear which he and Ada continued for the rest of his life, and which gave Ada the security to continue her work for the labour and women's movements. According to Ada's daughter, at this time the family enjoyed a range of intellectual interests, including visits to the Rochdale Theatre Royal whenever possible, and reading such authors as Wells and Bennett, and the American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Ada was also at least on speaking terms with such contemporary socialist luminaries as the MacDonalds, the Bruce Glasiers, J. R. Clynes, Enid Stacy, Julia Dawson of *The Clarion*, and Mary Macarthur of the National Federation of Women Workers.

It was about this time that Ada began to develop a serious interest in women's suffrage. At first, in 1904, this demonstrated itself in opposition to Christabel Pankhurst's (and the ILP's) support for the 1904 *Women's Suffrage Bill* on the grounds that it favoured well-to-do women at the expense of the working classes—an 'adult suffragist' viewpoint which she consistently maintained—and later, as a principled opponent of physical force, she rejected the militant tactics of the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union. However, by 1911 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was not only strongly opposed to militancy, but becoming closely involved with the labour movement, and it was at this time that Ada became a frequent contributor to the NUWSS organ, the *Common Cause*. She also became a paid organizer of the NUWSS in 1912. On the outbreak of war in 1914, as a convinced pacifist, she aligned herself with those members of the NUWSS (such

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as Catherine Marshall, Helena Swanwick, Maude Royden, and Selina Cooper) who refused on principle to undertake war work.

The war marked an end of Ada's major political activity, although she did continue to work in connection with lead poisoning, was an active member of the Manchester branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and made occasional contributions in the 1920s to the *Woman's Leader*, registering her opposition to Eleanor Rathbone's campaign for family allowances. However, she now concentrated on the family business, starting an independent mail-order wholesale drapery line which met with such success that by 1922 she had to rent a small warehouse. She retired from the mail-order business in 1930. Although a seasoned traveller to all parts of Britain, she had never been abroad until 1927, when she and her daughter holidayed in the south of France. This she followed with a visit to her brother in South Africa in 1932, a round-the-world tour in 1935, and motoring holidays in France and Switzerland. Her foreign travels were ended by the outbreak of the Second World War. Her husband died in 1940, and Ada herself died on 27 December 1945 at 55 Ormerod Road, Burnley, Lancashire. Her burial took place at Rochdale on 31 December. She was survived by her daughter, Doris, who later edited a selection of her writings together with a brief biography.

Ada Nield Chew was very diffident about her personal appearance, but contemporaries record that she was very good-looking, with striking red hair. Throughout her life she consistently and actively supported the causes of working women and of peace.

Sources

D. N. Chew, *Ada Nield Chew* (1982)

J. H. Bellamy and J. Saville, 'Chew, Ada Nield', *DLB*, vol. 5

Common Cause (1911–15)

b. cert.

m. cert.

d. cert.