

AN IRISHWOMAN'S PART IN ADMISSION OF WOMEN ATHLETES TO THE OLYMPIC GAMES - SOPHIE PEIRCE

by Seamus Ware

Birth and early life

In the fateful year of 1939, the death occurred as a result of an accident in London of Mrs. WILLIAMS, who was born in Ireland and christened as Sophie Catherine Theresa Mary PEIRCE-EVANS. The death received very little publicity as she had faded from public life, but in recent years recognition has been given at least in her native country to this remarkable Irishwoman - athlete, administrator, aviator, author.

She was born in the Olympic revival year of 1896 in Knockaderry House, near Newcastle West, Co. Limerick. Her father was Jackie PEIRCE, who inherited the house and lands (in one account he is said to have had 350 acres), and who changed his surname to PEIRCE-EVANS. He employed Kate DOOLIN from County Kerry as a housekeeper and later married her. Sophie was their only child. A legal action taken against Jackie by a neighbour went against him and he lost a lot of money. He got odd and when his wife, Kate, was found beaten to death in Knockaderry House, Jackie was charged with her murder. He was found guilty but insane and was confined for life in Dundrum (Criminal) Mental Hospital.

Sophie was about one year old at the time and was taken into the care of her grandfather, Dr. George PEIRCE, and her aunts. They lived in a large house in Newcastle West, now a bank premises, where a plaque was erected on the outer wall a few years ago. Following schooling, she enrolled at the *Royal College of Science in Ireland* (in Dublin). Sophie played hockey for the College, and after the death of her grandfather, money was running short for her studies. At the age of 19 she married Major ELLIOTT-LYNN, a British officer who was stationed in Dublin in 1915 or 1916, although another account says that she did not marry him until 1923.

He was called to active duty in WW I and she left the RCScI and enrolled in the *Royal Flying Corps* as a despatch rider. It is recorded that she rode her army motorcycle from Holyhead (Wales) to London in 11.5 hours, a women's record. At the end of the Great War, Major ELLIOTT-LYNN was awarded a payment of 1000 acres (c.400 hectares) of land in Kenya where he started a coffee farm.

Athletics career

Her husband agreed to finance Sophie to resume her studies and she went to the *University of Aberdeen*. Since athletic competition for women was virtually non-existent in Ireland in the 1920s., it was only at Aberdeen that Sophie was introduced to the sport and quickly showed talent in the jumping and throwing events. As was common at the time she was an all-rounder and in 1923/4 Sophie set "Irish records" in 6 events which lasted until the 1940s, and 1950s, (and in one case, the 1960s.). Her main events were the high jump and javelin, for which her height (5' 11.5" or 1.81m.) was an advantage.

Sophie was English champion in the javelin throw in 1923 and 1924, using a 15 yard approach run. A popular event at the time was the "combined hands total" for javelin, in which she attained a high standard. At the "Second International Ladies' Games" at Gothenburg in 1926, S. ELLIOTT-LYNN is recorded as coming 4 in that event. She is also credited in some publications with being joint holder of the World Record for the Women's High Jump (with E. STINE, USA) at 4' 10.5" (1.485m.), but this claim is unsubstantiated. There is also a report (in one source only) that she achieved a World Record for the javelin (both hands combined) of 173' 2" (c.52.8m.) - again doubtful.

Sophie competed in the 1923 Monte Carlo Games in 8 events and won bronze medals in 3 of them - high jump, javelin, and pentathlon. She was also involved in the first "Women's Olympic Games" (not approved by IOC) in Paris in 1922, whether as official or competitor is not clear.

Athletics administrator and admission of women to Olympic Games

Sophie temporarily gave up her athletics career in 1923 and joined her husband in Kenya. Major ELLIOTT-LYNN was also involved in mining prospecting and she helped to manage the coffee farm. She was discontented with domestic life and the marriage became strained. Shortly afterwards, she returned to England and got a divorce. From that period, she wrote a book *East African nights and other verses*, published in London in 1925.

When the Women's A.A.A. was founded in 1922, Sophie was elected Vice-President. At that time, the issues arose of the I.A.A.F. controlling women's athletics and of the admission of

women to the track and field events at the Olympic Games. The *Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale* was founded under the inspiration of Mme. MILLIAT of France, and talks commenced between them and the IAAF. At an IAAF Congress in 1926 at which a delegation from FSFI participated, it is reported in the book *Women's Athletics* by George PALLETT that "Mrs. Sophie Elliott-Lynn of Great Britain said that women had nothing to gain by participation in the Olympic Games"! That quotation, however, runs contrary to her other actions and statements.

Sophie was very interested in fitness for women and in health aspects, as she had intended to become a doctor. These subjects were a matter of controversy for sportswomen at the time. She wrote a coaching manual *Athletics for Women and Girls* published in 1925, which has been given the accolade by a former Irish athlete "it remains today (1997) one of the most sensible and comprehensive books of basic training for would-be female athletes". An IOC Congress was held in Prague in 1925 and associated with it was a Pedagogical Conference. Sophie attended the latter (as a delegate of the WAAA) and was elected to the Medical Sub-Commission. There she delivered a paper "Women's Participation in Athletics", which was later published as an appendix to her above-mentioned book (see text below). She was requested to give talks on BBC radio on the subject. As a result of these various discussions in 1925/6, and whether through Sophie's influence or not, there were five events for women (100m, 800m, 4x100m relay, high jump, discus) on the track and field programme for the 1928 Olympic Games.

On her flight back from Prague to London, she spoke to Captain REID of the RAF who on hearing of her interest, promised to introduce her to the *Light Aeroplane Club* in London. She took flying lessons and qualified as a pilot. She took up the rights of women in aviation just as she had campaigned earlier for women in athletics. In 1927 she married Sir James HEATH, a wealthy industrialist, who financed her new career. She made the first solo flight from Capetown via Cairo to London in 1928.

Sophie, now known as Lady HEATH, was selected to represent England as a judge at the Amsterdam Olympics. However, a British women's athletic team did not compete, probably in protest at the few events on offer. There are differing accounts in print as to whether Lady HEATH'S name was erased from the register of officials or whether she had mislaid her entrance

ticket. A colourful story (for which Tony BIJKERK has told me he can find no evidence locally) is that in consequence of being refused entry to the stadium, she fetched her light plane from a nearby airfield and circled low over the Olympic Stadium. The story (or legend) continues that she dropped a note demanding that she be admitted, which she was.

Later life

Her second marriage was also a failure. She obtained a commercial pilot's licence and is said to have been a pilot with KLM for a time. Sophie set light aircraft altitude records and was a rival of Amelia EARHART, who bought from her the Avian aeroplane that she had flown from the Cape to London, and this plane is still in flying order today. To make money, she gave demonstrations throughout the US. She had a serious accident with a plane in Cleveland, Ohio in 1929, in which she suffered serious injuries including to her head. Her second husband divorced her in 1932. She then married her third husband, George WILLIAMS, a fellow aviator. Her fame was such that at their wedding in Kentucky, the guests included the State Governor.

Mr. and Mrs. WILLIAMS then moved to Ireland, where Sophie became the first female instructor at Kildonan near Dublin (the first civil aerodrome in Ireland). When Kildonan was faced with closure because of the economic situation, she used the rest of her savings to buy it, and the WILLIAMS couple operated *Dublin Air Ferries* until that venture failed in 1936. Sadly that marriage also failed and ended in divorce. Despite a growing drink problem, she still sought more flying work and in 1937 went to England. Her death two years later was as a result of a fall down the stairs of a bus or tram. Her remains were cremated and her ashes scattered in the square at Newcastle West as she wished.

Sources

- 1) Lecture by John CUSSEN of Newcastle West at *University of Limerick* in 2000.
- 2) Books on women's athletics by George PALLETT (London 1954) and Noel HENRY (Dublin 1998).
- 3) A chapter by Mary SCANLAN, in a book on Irish women scientists and pioneers, based on her M.A. thesis at *University of Limerick* (1995).
- 4) I am indebted to John CUSSEN for a copy of the paper read at the Olympic Congress conference in Prague in 1925 (see below), which was published as an appendix to her book *Athletics for Women and Girls* (Robert Scott, London).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ATHLETICS

BY SOPHIE C. ELLIOTT-LYNN

There are two main features which have to be examined in facing this most difficult problem, which is daily becoming more difficult. The first is that male and female are derived from the same parent stock. They have been evolved together, and their methods of life are similar.

They have somewhat similar organic systems, the differences in skeleton and muscular formation being minor. The differences in the nervous and blood systems being still less noticeable.

The present adaptation of Womanhood of itself to the demands created by the labour market, bring her still closer to Manhood in her habits of life.

This feature of the question seems to indicate that the recreations and physical exercises taken by men might be found advantageous for women.

The second feature is that the basic function of men and women is totally different. Women's function is highly specialized, and when it is brought into play those minor differences which I mentioned a moment ago become strongly pronounced, and the woman becomes a totally different creature from that which she was before her role of motherhood was entered upon.

The differences which appear in the nervous, skeletal and muscular systems are all necessary adjuncts of the great work of parturition and anything which might tend to hinder or make this more difficult must be very heavily deprecated.

We have therefore before us the problem of finding a suitable mean between those sports which tax the muscular frame and put a strain upon it, and which are, of course, wholly unsuitable for the feminine organism, which is more delicate and should conserve its energy for the great work before it, and those recreations which are not sufficiently energetic to assist the woman towards the most healthy development she may attain.

It seems to me, therefore, that if those sports and games which are suitable for men be modified and reduced so that they cannot in any way injure the woman, and if we can create organisations which will enforce these modified regulations stringently, we will have gone a long way towards achieving our objects.

I have personally gone rather deeply into this subject, as I am an active athlete myself, as well as a publicist for women's athletics, and I find that women are capable of - roughly- three-quarters of what men are, without undue strain.

A good example of this is seen in the High Jump, when the action is condensed into one rapid movement. The world's record for men is a little over 6ft. 6in. The world's record for women is 4ft. 10 1/2in., which is exactly three-quarters of the men's. It has got to be proved that a thoroughly healthy and normal woman has less powers of endurance than a man.

Their very heritage of house-work and child-bearing seems to indicate that they have these powers in a marked degree, but what we want to determine is the advisability of using up this energy or letting it lie dormant till required in the fulfilment of her function in life, which, in many cases, is never utilized.

It would be difficult, to my mind, to reduce every game and sport by a formula. In many cases one has to be guided by results, and by scientific facts.

Speaking for myself, I would deprecate every game or sport in which too heavy boots or implements, etc., were used, as these cause unnatural development, and also any game or sport in which the element of "charging" was introduced. I consider that the effects of a blow received in a game may be more far-reaching than any local strain.

Confining oneself to pure athletics, I consider the running, in moderation, an ideal sport for women, if starting practice be not too much indulged in. It is there, and in the finish, that we have the greatest strain.

Woman's energy is slightly more available than a man's, in that her temperature is a fraction higher, and she recovers less rapidly from the expenditure of it. Excessive running also tends to ossify certain ligaments in the pelvic area, which in normal parturition become soft and elastic.

To my mind the 300 yards race is the limit to which women should be allowed to go till time has proved that damage is not done, when the distance could be extended.

The International Women's Federation have further reduced the events used by men. 8lb. is the standard weight for the Shot as against 16lb. for the men, which, as will be seen, is only half. The discus is also considerably reduced. The Hurdles are only 2ft. 6in. in height. They have found no ill results whatever for 1000 metres race when the women have been carefully and properly trained.

We are very much in favour of field events for women, realizing that the upward stretching movements employed in them are of great value,

and that the swaying and bending movements entailed especially by the throwing events are invaluable from the point of view of improvement of the intestinal circulation. In fact the majority of "Health Systems" have these movements as a basis for more than one group of exercises.

My Association, the Women's A.A.A. of England, has made an important step in the right direction by making all the throwing events, except the discus, bi-manual. Throwing alternatively with left and right hands, this makes for equal development of the trunk.

In my opinion the choice of events for young girls in athletics should be most chiefly ["carefully?" S.W.] gone into. The years between fourteen and eighteen are most critical in a woman's life. And until she attains the latter age and her frame becomes more set and her life regular, the less she does in the way of violent physical exercises the better, so long as her interest in those sports and recreations which will be of use to her in later life is kept alive.

For this reason, all that the young woman or girl does in athletics should be guided and controlled by experts, so that she may not either do too much and overstrain herself, or do wrong and unsuitable events and injure herself in any way.

Since my Association was formed in England we have never had a single case of injury or strain, except in cases where the girls have broken the fundamental rules of training. It is one of the most beautiful things I can imagine to see a group of young girls in summer happily competing with each other, full of bon camaraderie and joie de vivre. But we must ensure that from their young enthusiasm comes no ill results.

Sophie C. Elliott-Lynn

Vice-President Women's A.A.A. of England.

Resolutions of Medical Sub-Commission of Olympic Congress on the "Participation of Women"

June 1, 1925

- 1) The special functions in life of Woman make it necessary that she should not do anything to injure her special organization.
- 2) Her Sports must be carefully chosen and only those suitable for women can be proposed for training and competition.
- 3) The conditions for women in competition and practice must be reduced considerably from those arranged for men.
- 4) Medical tests are absolutely necessary both before, and periodically, during training.
- 5) Those Sports not fit for women must be cut out. Boxing, Wrestling, and Rugby. The majority of the Commission are against football.
- 6) Clothing regulations are very necessary and must be made by each Nation to prevent regrettable exhibitions.