

Spain's Scarlet Pimpernel

Ethel MacDonald

1909-1960

To live for an ideal is beyond most people, but Ethel MacDonald was among the few who put their cause beyond everything else.

One of nine children from a Lanarkshire family, she left home at 16 to fend for herself with a variety of low-paid jobs before becoming unemployed in the early 1930s.

At this point she became secretary to Guy Aldred, an anarchist-communist, who was setting up a Glasgow advice centre.

An opponent of parliamentary democracy, which she felt failed working people, she became heavily involved in radical politics.

Meetings and rallies are one thing, but in 1936 Ethel went to Spain at the request the anarchists, where she supported the defence of the republic against Franco's fascists, who were backed by Hitler.

Her nightly broadcasts on Radio Barcelona had a worldwide audience.

The republicans, however, were bitterly divided.

When pro-Stalin communists attacked the anarchist HQ Ethel loaded rifles for the defenders.

Many of her comrades were imprisoned, but she helped them escape.

Ethel even managed to engineer escapes when she was locked up herself, and became known as the Spanish Scarlet Pimpernel.

On returning to Glasgow she was given a hero's welcome.

For years afterwards she was involved in producing left-wing propaganda – and fought the trade union block on women in typography.

Strong and forthright all her life, she fell ill with multiple sclerosis in 1959 and by the time she died was completely paralysed.

- Read the Oxford DNB biography here: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/54406.html>.