

JOHN BALLANCE AND HIS ROLE IN SECURING VOTES FOR WOMEN

The NI man who changed the world for women

Glenavy man was great supporter of universal suffrage



BY GRAEME COUSINS
graeme.cousins@jpress.co.uk
@graemecousins

It is thanks to a Glenavy man of farming and Quaker stock that New Zealand became the first country to give women the right to vote 125 years ago.

John Ballance left his home in Ulster and went on to become the 14th prime minister of New Zealand, however his role in women's suffrage is often overlooked and overshadowed.

Next weekend a series of processions will take place throughout the UK to commemorate the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote in the UK, 25 years after Mr Ballance had paved the way in New Zealand.

A long-standing volunteer with the Ulster New Zealand Trust, Hilary Bracefield, told of the important role the Glenavy man had in her home country of New Zealand: "He got into parliament in 1875 and started trying to establish universal suffrage.

"The big push came from the Women's Temperance Movement – which to my horror I learned had another reason for supporting suffrage. They released they'd never get temperance if they didn't have representation in parliament. That was why they wanted the vote – to stop people drinking."

When Mr Ballance became the first Liberal Prime Minister in 1890 he immediately supported an Enfranchising Bill, declaring: "I believe in the absolute equality of the sexes."

Parliament at first stopped the passage of the bill with the



Top image: John Ballance. Above left, Ballance House in Glenavy. Above right: A depiction of the Women's Suffrage movement



per – The Wanganui Herald – which still exists, and became a member of parliament in 1875 as a founder member of the Liberal Party.

Following his death in 1893, a huge funeral was held in Wanganui for the man known as 'the rainmaker' by voters relieved to see the return of prosperity.

His legacy remains securing the rights for women to vote in New Zealand in 1893.

Mrs Bracefield, who is from Dunedin in New Zealand, made the opposite journey to Mr Ballance. She came to NI via Birmingham. Now retired, she had been head of the music department at the University of Ulster.

Asked why it took 25 years for the UK to catch up with New Zealand, Mrs Bracefield said: "You had more men to persuade than in New Zealand. The kind of people who went to New Zealand were usually enterprising people.

"They went off to an unknown place to make their own way, on their own, with a trade, money and gumption. That kind of person perhaps appreciates a woman's part more than others."

Mr Ballance's birthplace in Glenavy – The Ballance House – is home to the Ulster New Zealand Trust.

The farmhouse museum contains interesting exhibits on the Ballance family, on Northern Ireland's connections with New Zealand and on farming in the two countries.

It is open to the public between April and September on Sundays and bank holidays and can be booked for group visits all year round.



'He may have got some of his ideas from his mother'

Hilary Bracefield

Hon John Thomas Peacock stating: "Women's sphere is not politics. Home is, and should be, where they should rule by love and peace."

However, a final reading was passed in May 1893 and the bill passed into law in September, meaning women could vote in the general elec-

Suffragette marches in UK

On Sunday, June 10 women and girls in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London will walk together as part of this celebratory mass participation artwork called Processions.

Wearing either green, white or violet – the colours of the Suffragette movement – the idea is that the march will appear as a flowing river of colour through the city streets.

The time is to be confirmed and the venue will be Belfast city centre.

More details can be found on www.processions.co.uk The Ulster New Zealand Trust has encouraged as many women to take part in the free Belfast event.

tion in November.

Sadly, Mr Ballance – who had been struggling with illness for over six months – died in April 1893, aged only 54, just before that final reading.

Mrs Bracefield said: "The awful thing is, because John Ballance died before the bill had gone through, the next prime minister Richard Seddon – he gets all the credit for it. He was actually against women getting the vote, but he knew how popular Ballance was so it went through."

Prior to his extremely important political interventions in suffrage and also land reform, John Ballance had grown up as the eldest child of 11 on his father Samuel's farm close to Glenavy.

Mrs Bracefield explained what is known of his time in Ulster: "He went to school in Glenavy and Wilson's Academy in Belfast. At 14 he left Glenavy to become an ap-

prentice to an ironmonger in Belfast.

"He then went to Birmingham to work as an ironmonger, where he learnt a lot of liberal ideas from what was going on there at the time.

"Some thought has been given to the argument he may not have got on with his family because he never came back to Northern Ireland after he left.

"He was the oldest boy and their father wanted him to take over the farm which he may have been opposed to.

"His mother was a Quaker – he may have got some of his liberal ideas from her."

In Birmingham he met and married Fanny Taylor and the pair emigrated to Wanganui in 1866. In 1868 his wife died of illness, aged only 24. Two years later, he married Ellen Anderson, daughter of a Wellington architect.

Mr Ballance, who was also a mason, set up a newspa-