

Speech Helen Dunsmore Jans-Gremmee award no.2 (2007)

I am sure I started by saying 'It was a complete surprise to me a day or two ago when I was asked if I was willing to be nominated for the Jans-Gremmee award. I consider it a great honour to receive such a prestigious award. I have not had the time to prepare a learned speech so I thought I would just tell you how I came to join the Federation.

I was at the end of the final year of a first degree and I was keen to go on to do research. I saw an advertisement in the Students' Union for a fellowship given by the British Federation of University Women for post-graduate research. I wrote to the address in London and received a reply that this particular fellowship was not for someone who was just starting research but that, if I joined the Federation, I would hear about other possibilities. I filled in the enclosed application form for membership, leaving blank the last line which was 'Member introducing' since I did not know anyone who was a member.

The next thing was that I received a post card saying that the next meeting of the Glasgow Association would be on a Saturday afternoon in the Students' Union. It was at the beginning of June and I was wearing a cotton summer dress when I decided to go to the meeting. I put on my University blazer and went to the Union. I have never felt so much like a fish out of water! All the ladies were dressed for afternoon tea, complete with hats, gloves and frilly umbrellas (remember this was in 1948). I found the talk quite interesting and, as soon as it was finished, I made a bee-line for the door. A hand was put on my shoulder and I was entreated to wait and have a cup of tea and biscuit. As I went home I thought to myself 'Well that is the end of that!'

Imagine my surprise when, in the autumn, I got a letter inviting me to join the committee of the Glasgow Association! I still don't know who suggested it but 'nothing venture, nothing gain' so I went along. I found it fascinating hearing eminent local ladies discussing the various topics which came before the committee and I took my turn at addressing the post cards which were sent out as a reminder before each meeting. With over 400 members it took several people an evening to write all these addresses by hand.

In 1953 the Scottish Associations organised a post-conference tour following the IFUW Conference in London. I had heard it discussed at the committee meetings and knew that, for two weeks, the visitors would travel round by bus and receive home hospitality in the various towns where there was an association. At the last minute, someone realised that one could not put 55 visitors into two buses and send them off without a courier and I was asked if I could go. I felt daunted at the prospect but I read up some of the history and set off, not quite knowing what was expected of me. (At that time there was no organised tourist travel industry.) It was hectic and I learned a lot. I still remember some of the events, such as our visit to Glamis Castle. It was being opened specially for us so there was no one else in the castle but the guide. Our first stop was in the chapel, where we were told that a ghost known as 'the grey lady' was often seen and did not like the door of the chapel closed. As we left, the guide ostentatiously locked the door and we went on to see other rooms. On our return, the door was open!

During that fortnight I lost 7 kilos in weight but I gained several life-long friends and got an interest in the IFUW which persists to this day.

My recommendation to members is to take advantage of all the opportunities which the Federation offers.