

Mary Elmes

'I got things done':

*The Remarkable
Story of Mary Elmes*

Cork City Library would like to thank

Mary Elmes' daughter Caroline and her son Patrick for permission to use information and family photographs

Donald Davis from the American Friends Service Committee Archives

Ronald Friend for permission to use photos of his family

Jacinta Ryan for the reproduction of the sketch of Mary Elmes' home, Culgreine

Clodagh Finn author of *A Time to Risk All*, for her enthusiasm, help and advice.



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Mary Elmes

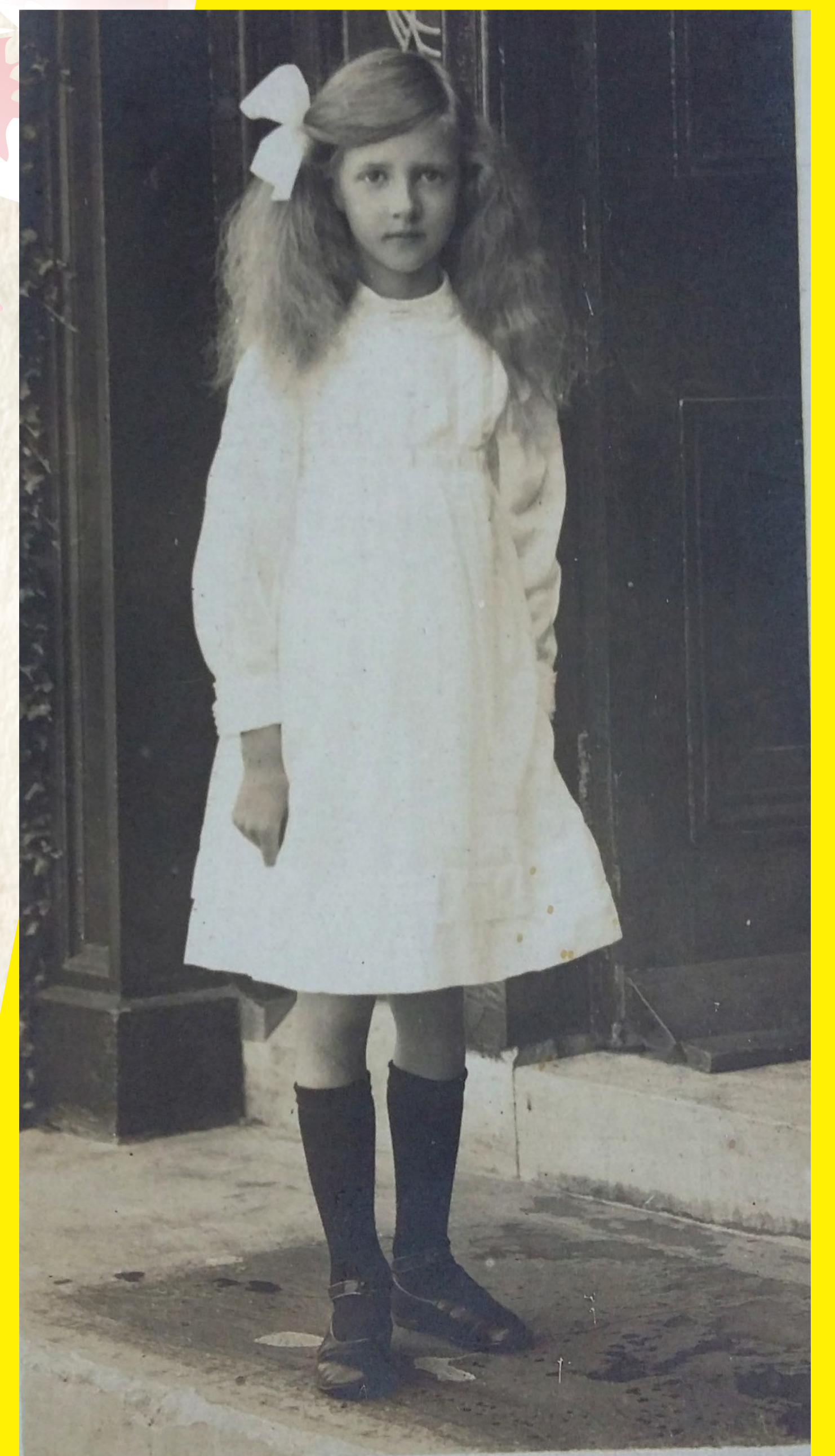
Early Years



Culgreine, 120 Blackrock Road, Ballintemple, Mary's childhood home.

Mary's mother Elizabeth was well educated and campaigned for women's suffrage as treasurer of the Munster Women's Franchise League.

As a child Mary was politically aware and knitted socks for soldiers fighting on the Western Front in World War 1. When the Lusitania was torpedoed and sank off the Cork coast on 7 May 1915, Mary and her family went to Cobh to offer their help. Perhaps this experience influenced her later decision to help victims of war.



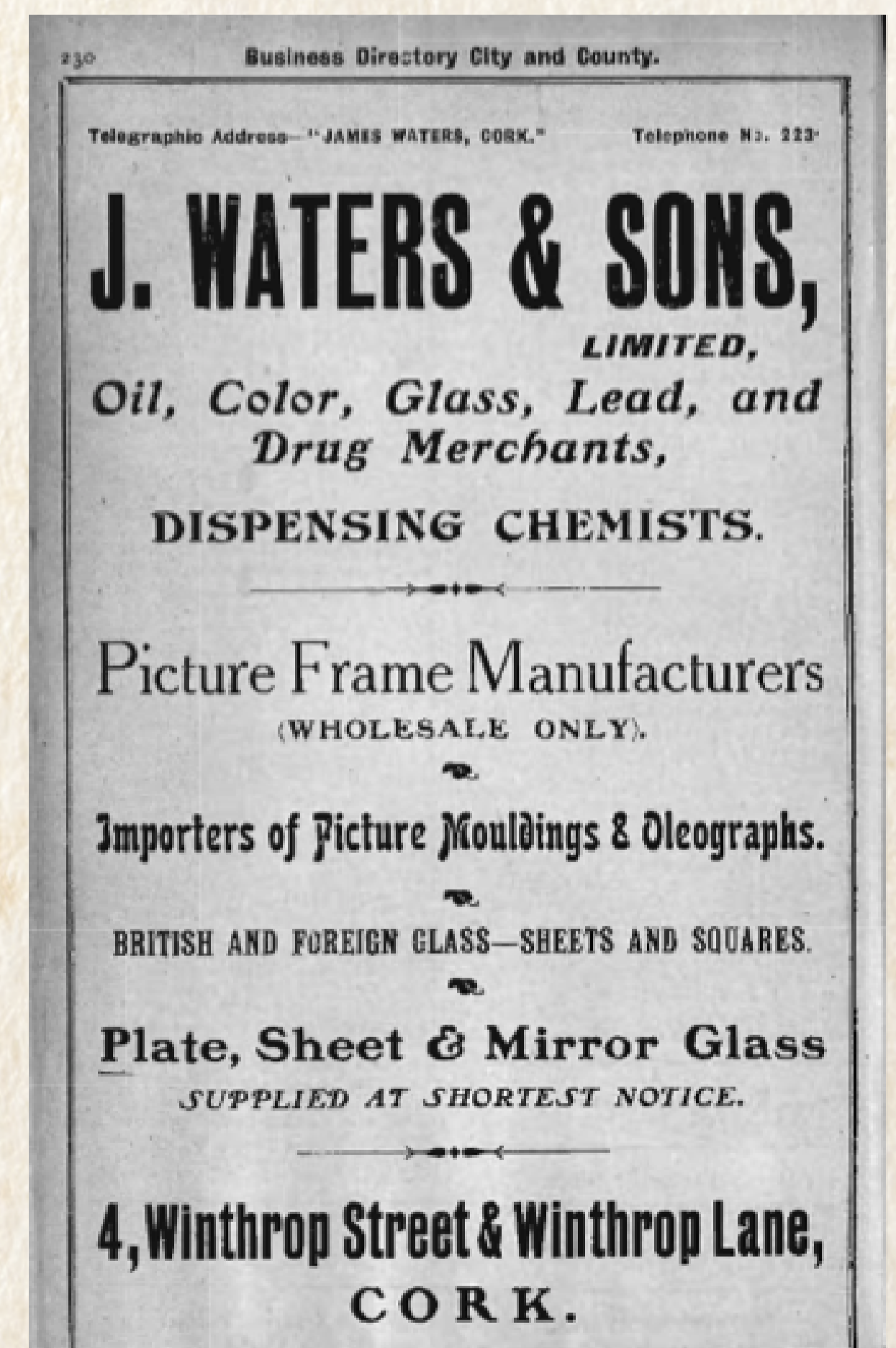
Mary aged about 8

Mary Elmes (1908 – 2002) was born Marie Elizabeth Jean Elmes in Ballintemple, Cork on May 5, 1908 to pharmacist Edward Elmes and his wife, Elizabeth Waters. Edward was originally from Waterford, Elizabeth from Cork, a member of the Waters family whose family business J. Waters & Sons Ltd. (Dispensing Chemists) was on Winthrop St. in the building now occupied by McDonalds.



Mary as a baby with her mother Elisabeth.

Mary was educated at the local Rochelle School on the Blackrock Rd. in Cork. Her school years were marked by political turmoil and in the early 1920s the War of Independence directly affected the family. The family business, J. Waters and Sons, a large dispensing chemist and glass supplier, was burned by British forces during the Burning of Cork in December 1920.



Ad. for Waters' pharmacy from Guys Cork Almanac, 1907.



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Mary Elmes

Brilliant Scholar

In 1928, Mary Elmes enrolled in Trinity College, Dublin to study Modern Languages (French and Spanish). She excelled from her first year and went on to graduate with a first class degree and to win a gold medal. She also won a scholarship to study International Relations at the London School of Economics (LSE). The LSE still has the 1932 reference provided by her former professor, T.B. Rudmose-Brown:

Miss Marie Elmes is a young lady of the highest character and of unusual intelligence. I have taught her for four years and have found her work exceptionally careful, exact and thoughtful. She has a well-balanced mind and excellent judgement. She distinguished herself very highly in the recent final examination for the Degree of B.A. with Honours in French and Spanish. She speaks and writes French with complete fluency and accuracy, is unusually well-read, and has profited more than most students by her reading.

(from A Time to Risk All, Clodagh Finn 2017)

At the LSE she won another scholarship to continue her education in Geneva. However, that was put one side when, being very aware of political events unfolding in Europe, she volunteered her services to the Save the Children office in Geneva.



Passport photo of Mary in the late 1930s



Mary at Trinity College; first row, second from the left



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Mary Elmes

Spanish Civil War

In February 1937, Mary joined the University of London Ambulance Unit in war-torn Spain and worked in a children's hospital in Almeria. She wasn't medically trained but she could speak Spanish and soon gained a reputation as a shrewd and able administrator who was clear-headed and unsentimental in the chaos of war.

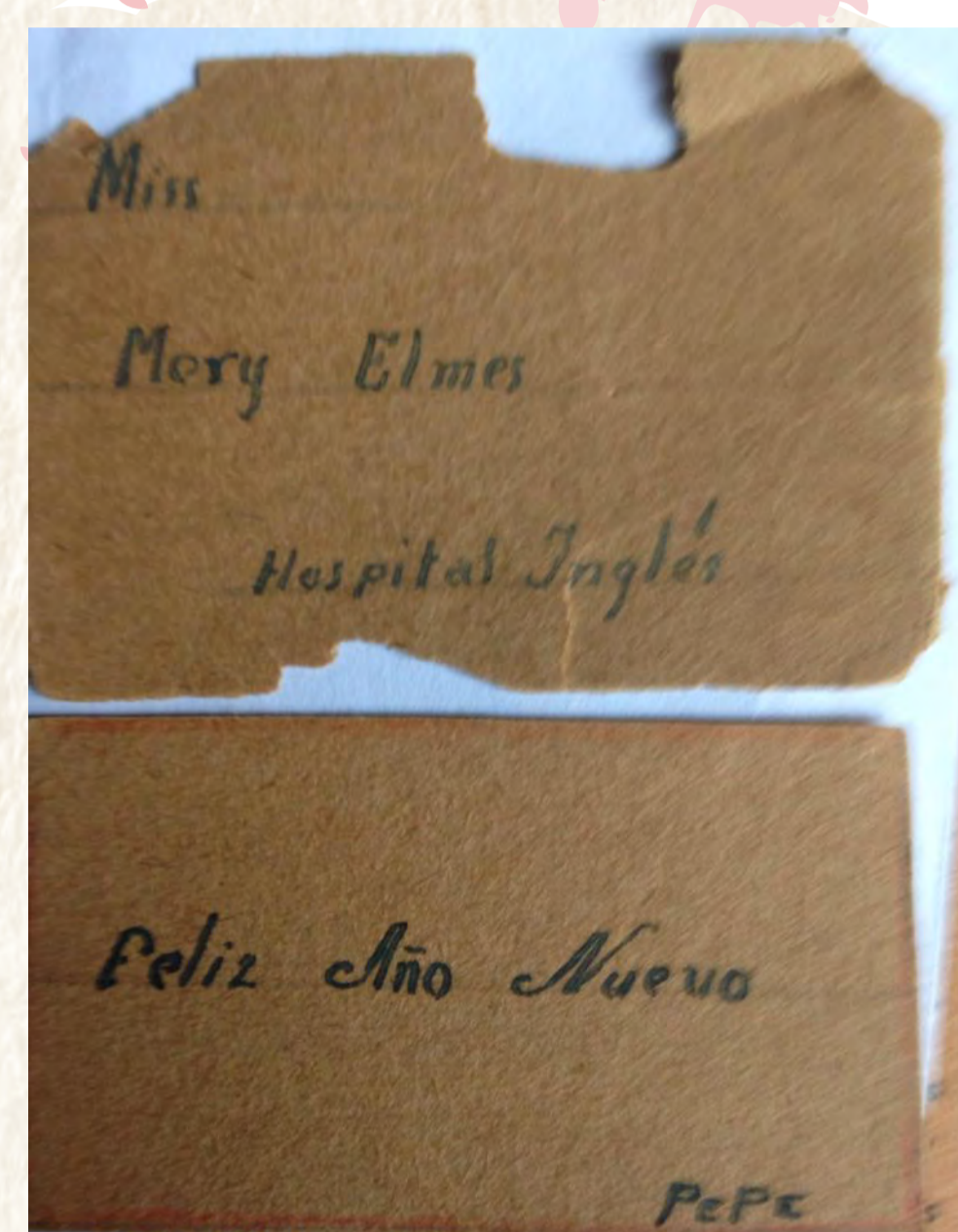
The bombing in Alicante became unbearable and she moved her charges to a house in the mountains at Polop where she carried on with her work until the war came to an end with the victory of General Franco's forces. Mary was particularly

moved by the plight of children in war and felt unable to leave them to attend her father's funeral when he died unexpectedly in January 1938. She wanted to adopt a little orphaned boy called Tato who had been found wandering alone in the battle trenches, however the Spanish authorities didn't allow her to do so.



Mary with Pepe aged 12

Pepe was a boy of about 12 who was a patient at the Children's Hospital about 30 miles from Alicante. At the beginning of 1939, he made a tiny card to wish Mary a Happy New Year.



New Year's card made for Mary by Pepe

'I liked to make people do things, but I didn't just give orders. I did things myself. I got things done. I had a fixed point of view and I went on with it. I was not emotional but rather clinical, like a doctor, or a soldier, I suppose. Luckily, I became hardened. It allowed me to work constantly.'

The card remains in the family archive along with the last photo of Pepe Puelles Varillas. The caption reads: Died 11 January 1939.

She once explained, during a rare interview, how she coped with the horror of war:



Mary with Tato

Palmira was 21 months old when she was badly injured in a bombing at the market place in Alicante in May 1938.

She was blown from her mother's arms and separated from her parents. She was rescued and taken to a hospital directed by Mary where the surgeon managed to save her foot.

She later wrote ...her family didn't find her for many days – what tears and what joy when finally her father found her.

(from A Time to Risk All by Clodagh Finn)

Mary with baby Palmira



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Mary Elmes

Spanish Civil War



Sir George Young's University Ambulance Unit and the Quakers set up feeding stations and hospitals in the war zone. In Murcia, malnutrition left children vulnerable to many conditions, including pneumonia, diarrhoea and abscesses.

Photo of children eating in Murcia

Mary left Spain in 1939 when it became impossible for aid workers to stay and returned to Cork briefly to see her widowed mother and younger brother John. She immediately applied to work with the Quakers, and followed her beloved Spanish refugees into France. Using the skills she had acquired in Spain, she set up workshops, canteens, schools and hospitals in the hastily erected camp-villages in southwest France.



Mary at a feeding station in Almeria, Spain, she is second from the right.



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World War II

With the fall of France, British workers had to leave, but Mary as a citizen of a neutral state stayed on. A new camp, Rivesaltes had opened and many Spaniards were transferred there. They were soon to be joined by thousands of Jews, rounded up and taken from their homes by the Vichy government; the government set up by the Germans in Southern France. Rivesaltes was a permanent camp, it had huts and toilets and the Quakers and other aid organisations established canteens and workshops there. It was an immense camp on a bleak open plain, there were rats and lice, there was malnutrition and the bitter wind of winter and the scorching heat of summer made living there intolerable.

Soon the deportations began. Train after train left crammed with Jews for "unknown destinations". Even the children weren't safe and had to be spirited away and hidden in more isolated places. In 1942 Mary risked her life several times by hiding Jewish children in her car and driving them to safe houses in the Pyrénées-Orientales region. In a two-month period in the autumn of that year, some 2,289 Jewish adults and 174 children, some as young as two, were herded onto cattle wagons at Rivesaltes and taken to Drancy transit camp outside Paris and then on to Auschwitz. An estimated 427 children were saved from the convoys, thanks to the work of Mary Elmes and other women working at the camp.

In November 1942 the Germans occupied the southern zone. One day in early 1943, acting on some kind of premonition, Mary hid incriminating papers in her bathroom. Some days later the German Security Police arrested her and she was taken first to the military prison in Toulouse and then to the Gestapo run Fresnes prison near Paris. She was suspected of espionage but was never formally charged and was released six months later. She dismissed her imprisonment with the words

"Well we all experienced inconveniences in those days, didn't we?"

(From A Time to Risk All, Clodagh Finn)



Mary at Canet Children's Home in France



Mary in her apartment in Perpignan after she was released from prison

Mary Elmes was appointed as head of the Quaker delegation in Perpignan in the summer of 1939 and had responsibility for an area about the size of Munster. Hundreds of her surviving letters reveal a determined and resourceful woman, but also a very diplomatic one. In July 1939 she was appointed by the International Commission of the American Friends Service Council for cultural work in the camps. She saw the need for books in Spanish, and shortly after her appointment was in Paris buying books for the libraries she was soon to open.



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Later Life

Mary Elmes refused to accept the salary which had accrued while she was in prison, and likewise the Legion d'Honneur, the French government's highest honour, which it wanted to bestow on her for her work as head of the delegation in Perpignan.

When the war ended she married Roger Danjou, a forester who cultivated vines and grew a range of crops including peaches and artichokes. They had two children, Caroline born in 1946 and Patrick born in 1948. Mary developed a business of her own, using the proceeds of the sale of her family home in Ballintemple to buy a property in Sainte-Marie-La-Mer, near Perpignan. Together with her friend and former colleague Charles Thum, they converted the building into gites which are still rented out by the family to holiday makers today.

Mary seldom spoke of the war and her work with the Quakers and busied herself with her young family. She remained an avid reader and followed international affairs closely. She refused all accolades and awards in her lifetime.

(From *A Time to Risk All* by Clodagh Finn)

Mary with her daughter Caroline



Mary on the terrace of her apartment in Perpignan



Mary in later years

Mary Elmes died in Perpignan on the 9th March 2002, aged 92.



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'Righteous Among the Nations'

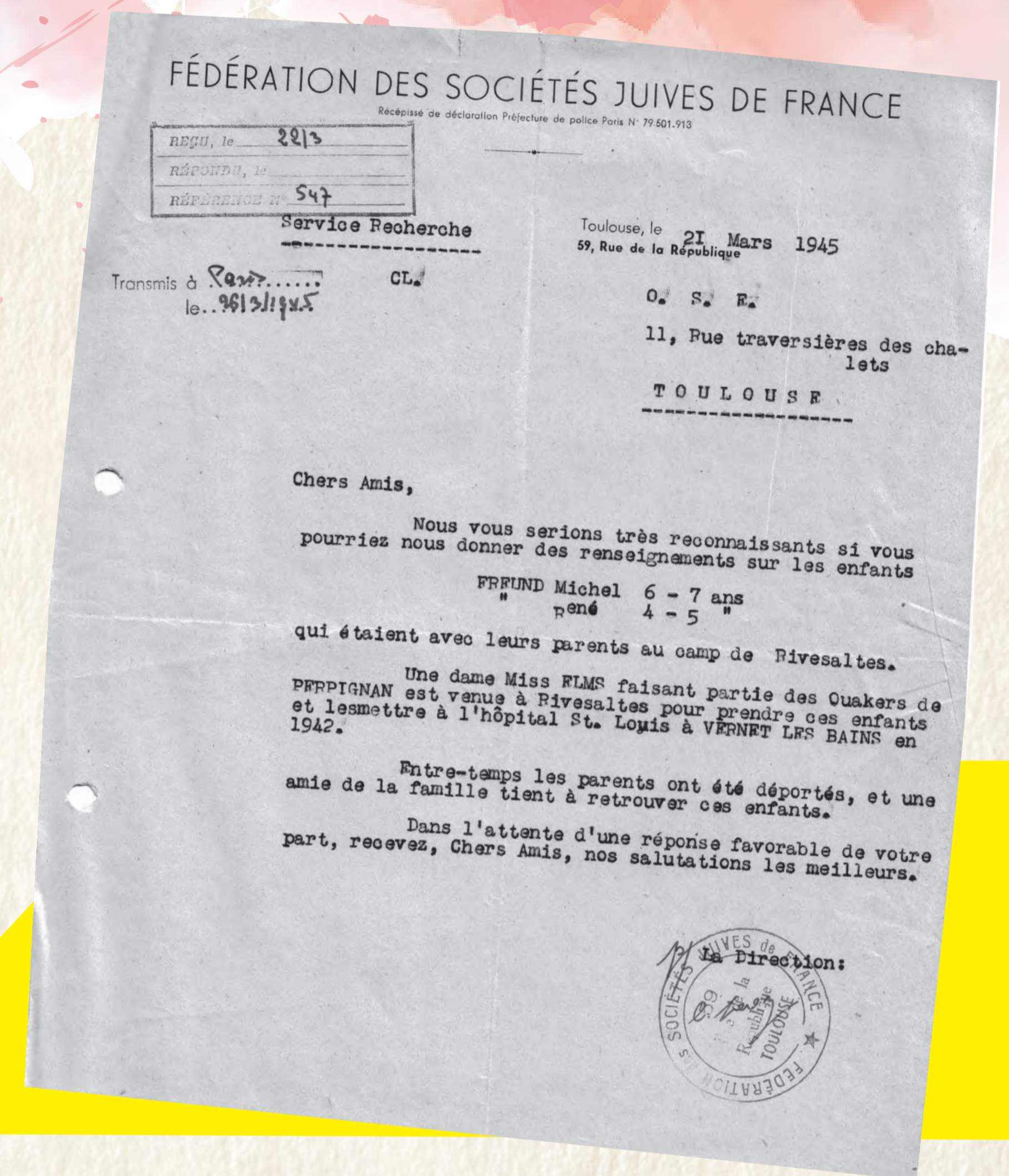


Ronald Freund (now Friend) and his brother Mario (now Michael) were two of the children Mary saved. He had always wondered how they were spared. In January 2011 he discovered that their saviour was a lady called 'Miss Elms' and that she had saved many other children by smuggling them high into the Pyrenees hidden in her car.

Ronald Friend was presented with bowls once owned by Mary Elmes



Ronald Friend, saved as a young boy by Mary, on the railway track out of Rivesaltes



Proof that Mary Elmes saved the Freund brothers

He was determined that Mary Elmes would be honoured for what she had done and nominated her for inclusion in the 'Righteous Among the Nations' at Yad Vashem, an award conferred by Israel on non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

His nomination read "Mary Elmes was clearly a figure who had not been given the recognition she deserved. She was head of the Quaker delegation in Perpignan with up to thirty people working directly under her. She had been given a prominent role and she showed the way. She was obviously a woman of great intelligence, strength and character."

(Taken from a Time to Risk All by Clodagh Finn)

As a result of the work done by Ronald Friend and the Wilsons, a British Quaker couple he enlisted to help him in his research, In 2015 Mary became the first and only Irish person honoured as 'Righteous Among the Nations' by the State of Israel, in recognition of her work in the Spanish Civil War and World War II.



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