

The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945

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In 2018 the commemorative events to mark the First World War, which start this year, will come to an end, but how will we mark the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, or even 90 years since all British women were granted the vote?

Wars and coronations are easy to package for the great British public. There are definite start and end dates, and well-understood outcomes. Fights for freedom and suffrage are untidy affairs, fraught with competing versions and contrary opinions. Last year, events to mark the centenary of the Great Suffrage Pilgrimage of Summer 1913 when, in a pre-Twitter age, more than 50,000 Suffragists marched on London, were ephemerally reported in local and national press, with marginally more attention being paid to revisiting and applying modern analytical methods to determine the details of Emily Davison's supposed suicide at Epsom 100 years on.

The summer of 1913 saw the height of tensions between the establishment and the growing militancy of the direct-action Suffragettes – the newspaper archives are full of excitable reports if you go and read them. At the same time the gulf between the Pankhurst-led Suffragettes and Fawcett's law-abiding Suffragists was at its widest. This fiery and gritty year in British history has hardly permeated our heritage, school curricula and TV history. Embarrassingly few know the difference between Suffragettes and Suffragists, let alone

what impact the social change they started has had on British society since.

Women's history is not minority history, even though its historiography has lent itself to being defined as such. So what Gottlieb, Toye and company have to offer in this book is really the other half of the story of inter-war British politics. As such, all historians of modern British history ought to pick up this volume and digest its contents and pause to wonder why the subjects of women and gender have not taken a more central role in their own history writing.

The editors introduce the book by describing how, in March 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed in the House of Commons by a majority of 385 to 55, and 'there was a momentous sense of achievement' (p. 1). Eight months before the Armistice this change in the law gave the vote to all adult men, and most women over the age of 30 – albeit that they would not experience this freedom until general election day in December 1918 when the thoughts of the nation were somewhat subdued by the prolonged and crushing end to war. The electorate tripled to 21.1 million and rose again to 28.8 million after the passing of the 1928 People (Equal Franchise) Act when women were given the vote on the same basis as men (p. 54). Gottlieb and Toye make clear that neither 1918 nor 1928 should be viewed as terminating events in the history of suffrage, but as landmarks in an evolving process of change in political representation that continued, and continues to this day (p. 2). If anything, the chronological span of the book could have reached beyond 1945 to avoid the editors' own warning about periodization, albeit that a couple of the contributions deal with periods before and after (p. 14).

The 12 contributions obey the editors' paradigms throughout resulting in a very tight volume of essays which expertly confer, and are of a similar tone and consistency when read as a whole. There is no thematic organisation of the chapters and the book can be comfortably read cover to cover or dipped into a chapter at a time making it ideal teaching and seminar material.

What is more difficult to unpick from the contributions are the key debates affecting the study of this subject. The idea that the war(s) played more of a role than the suffrage movement in emancipating women, or otherwise, is not tackled overtly. Similarly, to what extent was the suffrage movement really restricted to educated middle- and upper-class women, ultimately limiting its success because working-class women were largely excluded from it, or is that a myth that needs busting? I wanted to know what the contributors thought. Are these debates still worth having, or having again?

However, four themes stood out for me as provoking thought and new ideas: the changing divisions between women (and their male political counterparts) along party lines and the struggle with the idea of a block women's vote that transcended class and allegiance; responses from the press including how the papers got to grips with an entirely new voting readership; how feminist causes changed post-1918 and 1928; and the fate of those who had been anti-suffragist in the pre-war period. In all these areas I found the book utterly engrossing, and it is under these themes that I will review the book in more detail.

Although it is not immediately obvious, the book is not short on personalities. June Purvis's chapter on the post-suffrage life of Emmeline Pankhurst stands alone in the book as the only biographical contribution (pp. 19–36). What happened to the 'powerful orator and charismatic yet autocratic leader' who was the face and voice of the militant Suffragettes (and founder of the Women's Social and Political Union or WSPU in 1903) after 1918 (p. 19)? Purvis's chapter is full of astute observations that are refreshingly even-handed. From her and her daughter Christabel's transformation of the WSPU to the women-only Women's Party (which, it may surprise some to know, took a pro-war and imperialist stance) to her vocal opposition to Bolshevism and Communism – which alienated her from her other daughters who were staunchly socialist and pacifist, her struggle to make a living, leading her to temporarily emigrate to Canada to earn from public speaking (pp. 20–1), and her eventual defection to Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Party on her return to England during the General Strike of 1926 (pp. 24–31), Purvis presents Emmeline Pankhurst as the deeply complex, yet remarkably consistent personality that she was, albeit by the time of her death in June 1928 she struggled against a new generation of feminist politics (pp. 32–3). This is no better summed up than in the author's observation that, while other historians have suggested otherwise, her choice of contesting an

unwinnable working-class constituency in Whitechapel was due to her conviction that communism exploited the working classes, especially its women, and incited class hatred, and not simply because she had lost her feminist cause with a move to the political right (pp. 31, 34). As a reader you feel you have better understood the fierce woman behind the placard. I would have liked to have read similar treatments of the post-war lives of Pankhurst's contemporaries, Millicent Fawcett – her Suffragist rival and leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) – and international welfare campaigner Emily Hobhouse.

Politics in a man's world

One of the key questions following the Representation of the People Act in 1918 was how would women vote, and for which party? Another was how women MPs would cope in the redoubtably male environment of Parliament. More than half the contributors discuss this subject in their chapters. David Thackeray (pp. 37–53) examines how political parties attempted to woo women's support and understand what women of different social and cultural backgrounds found important. Thackeray's refreshingly comparative approach brings into focus the particularly neglected topic of what happened to the Liberal women who were so prominent in the Suffrage era but failed to form an identity for themselves afterwards, particularly after the Lloyd-George/Asquith split (pp. 38, 48). Making many comparisons through the evidence from party magazines, we learn how, in contrast, Conservative and Labour women rallied to promote their views to the new voting woman as a person interested in the purchasing power of the pound and the employment prospects of her family (pp. 47–9).

Both Toye (pp. 70–86) and Takayanagi (pp. 181–202) examine the changing face of Parliament in the inter-war period, a relatively neglected topic in British institutional history. One of the observations Toye makes is that the newly elected women MPs often felt the burden of being seen as a representative of all women, rather than just of their constituents, adding to the pressures of their new political lives – a theme returned to in Krista Cowman's chapter on autobiography (p. 74). Takayanagi makes some startling observations about the first women MPs. Women never numbered more than 15 out of 615 members of the Commons, they could not sit in the House of Lords until 1958, and those few who made it to a Parliamentary Select Committee were, unsurprisingly perhaps, co-opted to those which were thought to deal with women's issues or subjects women were deemed to be good at, such as the Kitchen Committee which oversaw the House of Commons' domestic arrangements (p. 191). Takayanagi concludes that Select Committees gave women who had prior experience of campaigning organisations a more comfortable arena in which to apply their political skills than the aggressive debating chamber (p. 198).

Helen McCarthy provides a stimulating insight into inter-war international affairs, which, contrary to the idealism felt in post-war Britain, became even more distant from the influence of the new electorate (pp. 142–58). So while mums were encouraged to wage war on war and women of all political persuasions partook in League of Nations Union peace meetings, the government lurched further into the murky world of official secrets preventing women (and many men) from having a democratising impact on foreign policy (pp. 143–7). The series of so-called Munich by-elections of 1938–9 brought into focus many of the issues and anxieties that had developed following two decades of mass democracy (pp. 159–80). Gottlieb suggests that the electorate was polarised into those who supported Prime Minister Chamberlain's appeasement plans and that the women's vote was believed to be unpredictable, disproportional, and its emasculating effect to seriously endanger the interests of the nation (pp. 164–5). The power of these preconceptions, fuelled by the speculation of contemporary media, masked a reality that women's views on foreign policy were just as complex as those of their male counterparts, but our sources lack the grist to demonstrate the extent of anti-appeasement feeling amongst women of all backgrounds (p. 177).

Mass democracy

The impact of sudden mass democracy on shaping ideas about women in politics in the inter-war years occupies a number of other contributions to the book. Pat Thane (pp. 54–69) contrasts the instability of the British economy and vacillations in the political system with the relative stability of its social fabric compared with the country's European cousins – the much vaunted General Strike of 1926 lasted a mere ten

days and extremist parties failed to get a foothold (pp. 54–5). Against this background non-partisan groups and associations such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and several charitable organisations had a greater impact on British political culture, particularly welfare reform, than has hitherto been acknowledged (p. 56). Local government too provided women with a structure in which to exert their newly found political voices and convert their beliefs into action, particularly as Independents (pp. 63–4). Many politicised women in a post-suffrage world preferred to be active in non-partisan campaigning organisations than in mainstream politics, about which there remained scepticism even after 1945, particularly at a national level (p. 66).

‘I am’, she lamented, ‘always being rung up or written to by some newspaper and asked what my opinion is’ (p. 87). This is my favourite line of the book, from Adrian Bingham’s chapter on the British popular press between the wars, and citing novelist Rose Macaulay speaking to a feminist group in November 1925. A leitmotif in all the contributions is how politicised women negotiated a space in the political fabric of Britain and how they responded to the seemingly incredulous reactions of the establishment. Bingham exposes what the contemporary press found to say to their now-voting female readership, and, more importantly, how they profited from their following by targeting advertising at them (pp. 88–9). Many papers such as the *Daily Mail* also made (in)elegant U-turns on their pre-war stance against votes for women by attempting to make politics more relevant to their (domestic) lives and to foster behaviours that would increase their readership such as campaigns to buy British and Empire goods (pp. 90–1, p. 94). Bingham’s chapter also brings to light how the popular press failed to report equitably on newsworthy issues concerning or about women as the suffrage struggle slowly became ‘old news’ (p. 100).

What political women thought about their lives after achieving suffrage victories in 1918 and 1928 is best discussed in Krista Cowman’s chapter on political autobiographies (pp. 203–33). While women’s memoirs have tended to be overlooked in the study of political biography, those of Labour, socialist and communist women have attracted more attention (because more were written by them) than those of their Liberal and Conservative counterparts (p. 204). Women used autobiographies to shape the history of the suffrage movement from both the suffragette and suffragist points of view – all invaluable sources for our own understanding of the ways in which politicised women thought and acted, how they reflected upon those actions, and how others analysed them (p. 205). Through their life writing we come to understand the dilemma faced by the first women MPs to represent both their constituents and women in general (pp. 210–11). But the response was complex. Women writers such as Mary Agnes Hamilton and Shirley Williams risibly acknowledged the ‘silly business’ of viewing women MPs as a singular unit, yet, as echoed in other female political biographies, there was always some reliance on cross-party female moral support (pp. 211–12). Ultimately, however, Cowman reminds us that most women’s life writing was more concerned with presenting themselves as loyal to party ideals, rather than to purely feminist causes (p. 220).

New causes

The quest for new roles, struggles or fights against the male-dominated establishment, took many different forms following the series of enfranchising acts of Parliament post-1918. Karen Hunt and June Hannam (pp. 124–41) provide a contrast to most of the other contributions by exploring women’s lives as citizens in their local communities. The (re)negotiation of a feminist identity preoccupied several groups with the Mothers’ Union and Townswomen’s Guild eschewing the label and a whole host of ‘unorganised’ enfranchised women suddenly finding that their opinion might make a difference in their society (pp. 125–6). The authors go on to set an agenda for the microscopic, almost forensic, study of every dimension of women’s politics at a local level so that these factors can be compared and analysed in a way that reflects the true complexity of women’s thought and action in this period – hence the use of ‘archaeology’ in the title of the chapter (p. 127). An astute observation given in their examples was how women dealt with, or used, issues that had never been politicised before enfranchisement such as milk provision and female unemployment (p. 131). The top-most demand of women’s groups was housing, which many fought to get on local political agendas (p. 133).

Laura Beers (pp. 224–42) examines a different set of new causes pursued by another neglected group, the

Women for Westminster society (1942–9). Its small size of less than 10,000 and its eventual failure encapsulates and brings to light the barriers that failed to be removed for women seeking election to Parliament (p. 225). The aim of this group was simple, to train, provide support for and assist women as prospective parliamentary candidates of whichever party. Much misinformation about the society exists in other history writing which Beers does an excellent job to untangle and dispel (pp. 225–6). What set Women for Westminster apart from other organisations which encouraged active citizenship amongst women was the necessity to engage with party organisations if it was to succeed in its aims of getting more women elected as MPs, and it was mostly this that caused friction, frustration and mutual suspicion (pp. 227–30). While its success in promoting female candidature was limited, the society nevertheless took its role to encourage voting amongst women seriously – like many other feminist and women’s organisations of the period (p. 232–3). By 1949 the society had dwindled and Beers spends the rest of the chapter examining the activities of its few remaining branches. Glasgow was the largest and most active of the two post-war survivors, which she attributes to the lack of fundamental political disagreement between members which had riven other branches, and ultimately caused their decline (pp. 233–5). Ultimately Beers, as many of the other contributors to the book also demonstrate, that women’s party political allegiance, or indeed their non-partisan interests, far outweighed their interest in pursuing a separate feminist agenda (p. 239).

Anti-suffragists

And what of those women who never wanted the vote? Philippe Vervaecke (pp. 105–23) flies the flag for exploring what happened to female antis between the wars. Vervaecke looks at how those women who had been part of the National League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage conducted themselves in public life after 1918 and 1928. What might surprise readers is that cooperation between suffragists and antis existed before and after the First World War and, unsurprisingly, women who felt strongly about not stepping into politics continued charitable and other community works in apolitical groups (p. 107). As much as Emmeline Pankhurst came up against generational differences with other women after 1918, so too did many anti-suffragists (p. 108). In the main anti-suffragists came from high society and the aristocracy, saw themselves as beholders of traditional social hierarchies and were staunchly imperialist, and for that reason were often characterised as being out of touch with the ordinary woman (p. 109). But one way in which former antis found a role for themselves was as magistrates and as representatives in local councils, showing that these women had no qualms in taking advantage of the new opportunities available to them, particularly on the back of their superior social status (p. 117). For the rest, private philanthropy and patronage ensured that those women’s legacies were just as far reaching, if not more so, than their political counterparts.

This book makes me feel more strongly about a need to return to women’s rather than gender history. There is so much across many periods and subjects we just do not know, let alone understand. The contributors’ painstaking work in this book shows that it is no longer justifiable to hide behind a lack of sources but instead we need to be asking the right questions. Bring on 2018.

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