

Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918 - 1928

Review Number:

270

Publish date:

Friday, 1 February, 2002

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ISBN:

9781860642012

Date of Publication:

1997

Price:

£39.50

Pages:

224pp.

Publisher:

I B Tauris

Publisher url:

<http://www.ibtauris.com/display.asp?K=9781860642012>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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When she was interviewed by Dale Spender in 1983 for a book about early twentieth century feminists, the veteran activist Mary Stott was probed in detail about her life. Spender was particularly interested in how she filled her time in the years between the end of the First World War and the 1960s when the emergence of a discernible feminist consciousness and a tangible women's movement were visible. 'What,' Stott was asked, 'did you do during the time when there was no women's movement' to take up her time and energy. Stott considered this briefly before responding with the furious assertion that provided the title for Spender's book. 'What do you mean?....There's always been a women's movement this century.'⁽¹⁾

Despite this, the years before 1918 still provide the subject for much British women's history. Suffrage continues to fascinate, and the recent reinterpretations of the British campaigns by June Purvis and Sandra Holton amongst others ensure that it remains in the public eye. Meanwhile beyond the realms of academic history the public thirst for knowledge of all aspects of the First World War shows little signs of abating as the war itself recedes into the previous century. Popular literature may have moved on a war, replacing *Birdsong* with *Charlotte Grey*, but it is still largely the armistice of 1918 which is commemorated in newspapers, television broadcasts and radio features each November. The eagerness with which family historians access the Commonwealth War Graves website and the public support for Lord Faulkner's campaign against Belgian plans to reroute the A19 through the Ypres salient witness the hold that the events of 1914 - 18 retain on our collective national consciousness. Women's historians too frequently return to the First World War. Whilst their conception of what constitutes a revision of 'war history' may differ from the combatant focus of military historians, their contributions to First World War historiography have been

numerous. The 'Home Front' has been the focus of work by scholars including Deborah Thom and Angela Woollacott who have attempted to deduce the extent to which the enfranchisement of some British women in 1918 can be seen as a reward for their war work. Other historians such as Jo Vellacott and Ann Wiltsher have concentrated on the discernible wave of feminist pacifism which emerged in response to what it conceptualised as a masculine conflict. Their work identifies groups of women who drew on pre-war discourses of difference feminism to argue particular claims for women as arbitrators and peacemakers. Against this, women's patriotism and their work in uniformed organisations has been reclaimed in a plethora of recent work including that of Susan Grayzel.

What each of these works hold in common is an acceptance that the chronology of the First World War and its preceding decade also represents a significant period in women's history. The years following the war have received much less attention. So, although the actual participants of a post-First World War feminism such as Stott were adamant that they were involved in a discernible movement after 1918, its historical evaluation is sparse. Law's book is therefore most welcome in its acknowledgement that the 1920s is a significant period in the history of British feminism. Rather than offering an ending to pre-war campaigns in which 'only a rump...limped into the post-war period,' [p. 1] she sees the 1920s as 'a time when women were engaged in the transformative stage from wielding influence to exercising power.' [p. 9]. How they achieved this power, and what they actually did must be a key question to anyone with an interest in earlier or later campaigns as it represents both the culmination of earlier parliamentary ambitions and also the beginning of a more complex relationship between feminist politics and a political establishment in which women were no longer legally forced to remain on the margins of power and influence.

It is disappointing that with a crucial and virtually uncharted era at the centre of her narrative, Law appears to have found difficulty in breaking free of the earlier period. A proportion of the book remains concerned with explaining the responses of the British women's movement to the First World War and exploring the war's effect on feminism. This is most obvious in the second chapter, 'Setting the Scene.' Here, the complex relationships of a range of suffrage organisations are considered, and Law reminds us that amongst the grass roots membership there was anything but universal compliance with the decision of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst (who led one of over fifty suffrage societies in 1914, albeit one of the three largest) that the demand for the vote should cease for the duration of the war, and women's efforts be redirected towards support for the endeavours of the British Expeditionary Force. Whilst a reassessment of feminist responses to the outbreak of war, especially one which recognises both their plurality and their diversity is in itself long overdue, a single chapter is possibly not the best forum for this. Events and responses to them are necessarily broadly sketched and important nuances can be missed. Law recognises this when she says that her 'broad categorisation' of responses into 'those who worked for peace; those who "kept the suffrage flag flying" and those who supported the war effort through welfare and industrial work' fails to reflect the 'multiple involvement' of many participants. [p. 14]. Organising the chapter around precisely these responses means it runs the risk of falling into exactly those approaches which it explicitly seeks to redress, concentrating again on the war at the expense of its aftermath.

The war period also hangs over the third chapter devoted to 'Survival and Progress.' Here Law tackles (amongst others) the key theme of exactly what the organisations which had campaigned for the vote for anything up to twenty years proposed to do with it now it had been partially achieved. She identifies this period as laying the foundation for much of the next decade's work. She draws out the complex realignments of individuals and organisations as the franchise receded in importance. Her narrative shows how many of the other preoccupations of those who had primarily identified themselves as pro-suffrage were allowed to come to the fore. Yet the book finds it difficult to move on from the enormity of the war years, and returns continually to pre-armistice debates and decisions in order to explain things. It is not really until chapter four that Law finally breaks free of the shadow of the war in her investigation of women's demobilisation and even here there are references to earlier events such as the 1915 National Conference on War Service for Women and the 1916 statement of the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations.

A large proportion of the remaining two thirds of the book focuses on or around Parliament, either implicitly through examining legislation or explicitly in investigations of women's electoral campaigns and work as

MPs. Given the status that the parliamentary vote held in the pre-war women's movement, when the term 'suffrage movement' had come to be used as a short-hand for many types of feminism, this is not surprising. Since the final decade of the nineteenth century feminists from a variety of political traditions had come to see the vote as an essential precursor to any further woman-centred social reform. Now that partial enfranchisement was achieved there was a tremendous pressure on the women's movement to ensure that the vote would deliver all that had been claimed for it. The most obvious problem that women faced concerned the actual mechanics of getting into parliament. Law describes in detail some of the many difficulties which candidates encountered. Implicit in all the accounts is an unresolved tension in the relationship between feminism and party politics. An attempt to form a 'Women's Party' by the few feminists remaining in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) proved an electoral disaster. Some women attempted to secure election as independent candidates but found themselves thwarted by a combination of conservatism (with a small c) within an electorate who would not give up party candidates and the impossibility of combating the full weight of party electoral machines. Law offers evidence for the attempts of some feminist organisations to appeal to a gendered (rather than a party-political) electorate, which largely failed. Against this, many feminists moved into (or in some cases returned to) party politics. Yet here too Law demonstrates how they faced opposition. Her descriptions have a depressingly familiar ring for those familiar with party selection procedures or the debates around them in the early twenty-first century. For a variety of reasons, often unspecified, women found it almost impossible to be selected for safe or winnable seats. The covert reasons, (Law cites Eleanor Rathbone's explanation that women were unable to 'cultivate....the "come and have a drink"' attitudes essential to winning support within constituency parties) had a more sinister outcome. One ex-candidate feared that the continuing trend to place women in impossible contests was that 'it would tend to establish the legend that women never get in.' [p. 150]. Although Law offers one example of a woman who was selected on grounds of sex, she is not named and appears to be an exception. [p. 157]. The overall impression conveyed is of a quite depressing scene of almost insurmountable difficulties.

Law also demonstrates that candidates who were selected could find their problems beginning. Their 'political baptism of fire' involved them being flung into a maelstrom of press and public attention. Although she does not dwell too much on this aspect of campaigning, it is clear that women's dress, deportment and conduct were of far greater interest to the electorate (or at least the reporting media) than their policies. All aspects of their lives appear to have been fair game, with Ray Strachey being forced to issue a leaflet assuring voters that her children were 'not neglected.' [p. 152]. Not surprisingly candidate numbers remained small and successes few. The 1918 election saw only one success in Constance Markievicz who, as a Sinn Fein member, refused to take her seat. Law sees a 'cruel irony' in this given the hopes that feminists had had for the vote. [p. 120]. It was not until 1919 that Nancy Astor was elected for the Conservatives at a by-election, to be joined by Margaret Wintringham who came to represent the Liberal Party by the same route. Interestingly, although Law does not dwell on this, both these elections offer an ironic counterpoint to the pre-voting arguments of the anti-suffrage movement that women were adequately represented by their husbands, a married couple being one in the eyes of the law. Both Astor and Wintringham took over their husbands seats, Astor when her husband took the family title and seat in the Lords and Wintringham as a widow. This familial relationship with the selection process was not one predicted by the suffrage movement.

Law's discussion of Astor's election also demonstrates the remarkable pragmatism of the post-war women's movement. The redoubtable Ray Strachey, a leading figure in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and its successor the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) who's personal politics were of a more radical persuasion was nevertheless quick to offer her services to Astor as a parliamentary secretary. Presumably she acted on the assumption that even a Tory woman in parliament was better than no woman at all. Her confidence proved well-founded, however, and Astor, although not formally allied with feminist organisations before the election, proved a tireless worker on behalf of many women's causes in Parliament.

Through her discussion of Astor, Law reminds us of just how bitter the path trodden by early women MPs could be. Whilst the press fixated on her clothing, Astor found her position lonely with many men refusing

to communicate with her or even acknowledge her presence in the House. This and her feminism appear to have facilitated the close working relationship she established first with Mrs Wintringham then later with labour women MPs such as Ellen Wilkinson with whom she campaigned on women's issues across party lines. This is an aspect of the work of early women MPs which could have been more thoroughly investigated in the text. The small numbers of women elected made it impossible for them to achieve anything collectively within their parties. In 1922 only Astor and Wintringham were returned, despite the efforts of the women's movement in 33 constituencies. Consequentially women remained largely in the position they had been in before the vote, relying on sympathetic men to support their campaigns in parliament (although women voters did at least make male MPs more accountable in theory). Brian Harrison revealed that Astor was attempting to break through the boundaries of party politics in her work, quoting her desire for 'women MPs to see themselves as women first and party members second.'² Whether she succeeded in this, or whether it was in any way supported by other party women remains opaque.

As well as an understandable concern with candidatures and elections, Law offers some interpretations of how a partially enfranchised women's movement used the legislative process to achieve its aim that the vote would become a key instigator of feminist change. Clear connections are described between the concerns of post-war activists and the pre-war feminist movement. In some instances the issues which emerged could not have been predicted. It was arguably impossible in 1914 to guess that one of the earliest legislative victories for enfranchised women would be concerned with state attitudes towards prostitution, but Law singles out the campaign waged by the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) as the 'first protest' to succeed. [p. 68]. She also demonstrates how feminists were quick to ascribe this success (which involved a u-turn by military authorities on their policy of British soldiers' visits to "tolerated brothels" in France) to their newly enfranchised status, quoting from the *International Women's Suffrage News* of April 1918. 'Josephine Butler has to work 17 years for the abolition of regulation in garrison and seaport towns. Now that women have votes, things move more quickly.' [p. 96]. Although enthusiastic in her chronicling of victories, Law is cautious in not over-estimating them, and her text is continually mindful of the difficulties women encountered when pressing for reforms. Changes such as those demanded to ensure equal legal rights for mothers alongside those of fathers and attempts to guarantee maintenance to illegitimate children failed despite strong feminist pressure. Both demonstrated a concern for the welfare of mothers and children of the type cited by pre-war feminists as typical of the problems a woman's vote would solve, yet ultimately fell to parliamentary filibustering. As if this were not enough, Law reminds us that in many instances feminist were running to keep still, attempting to consolidate gains which were now put under threat. She uses a discussion of attitudes towards women's police to exemplify this, outlining how their status remained in question due to their classification as an 'experiment' which would be stopped if deemed to fail, although 'failure' was never defined. [p. 104]. The patrol's successes in many areas of policing, especially those dealing with women and children made it difficult to attack them working within any definition of failure. Law then explains how the significant hostile elements within the police establishment attempted another approach, classifying women's patrols as being engaged in welfare work rather than policing. This opened the way for the 1922 Geddes Report to recommend their disbanding on economic grounds. Although an energetic feminist campaign saved the Patrols, it did little to advance feminist organisations, as the episode serves to remind the reader that in many cases energies were diverted from new campaigns into supporting earlier victories. Retrenchment was thus partially forced on the movement despite its attempts to move beyond its earlier work.

Amidst an understandable focus on parliament and legislation, Law's text also reminds us that the campaign for the vote continued long beyond 1918. Overstretched feminist resources were also directed into working for equal enfranchisement. Law sketches out the smaller legal changes which resulted in women's age-based franchise looking increasingly anomalous when they could actually become MPs at 21 but not vote until 30. (p. 209). Pressure grew within and without parliament, culminating in a large procession in 1926 which Law is careful to present as not simply a revival of pre-war tactics but also as evidence of 'the extraordinary network which women's movement had created in less than 60 years' featuring ex-militant and constitutional suffragettes and suffragists, newer bodies such as the Six Point Group and occupational organisations including the National Union of Women Teachers. This procession combined with the removal

of sexual inequality in many legal fields and the sustained attempts of enfranchised women left no doubt of the strength of support for a totally equal franchise. Law is cautious in her attribution of success to purely public displays. She explains the predicament that many women were in under the 1918 act. The enfranchisement of some and electoral success of others left those who sought a return to militancy in a difficult position as they would, strictly speaking have been reacting against themselves or at least against a feminised establishment. Nevertheless the text offers a tantalising glimpse of what might have been had the 1928 Act been withheld. The Young Suffragists, a group formed in 1926 to represent the disenfranchised under-30s are described in action. They ‘delivered a petition to the Prime Minister’s house...; followed up with a break in at Buckingham Palace in an attempt to present a letter to the King.’ [p. 217]. Sadly no more details of their activities (or reactions to them) are provided, but the episode demonstrates that a plurality of approaches continued to permeate post-war feminism.

Laws narrative ranges over a wealth of campaigns and a somewhat bewildering number of organisations (the list at the back is most helpful) to offer a strong contradiction to the notion that the 1920s are a less interesting period in the history of British feminism. It is unfortunate that the text does find it difficult to remain confined within the 1920s, but displays a tendency to dwell on the slightly earlier war-years. Although some brief element of background explanation is undoubtedly useful, one has to be ruthless in these days of constrictive word-lengths. More detail could have been afforded to certain aspects of the 1920s campaigns had the earlier period been omitted. There might also have been room to extend the analysis beyond the understandable parliamentary/legislative focus to say something about grass roots campaigns. At present these are largely missing from the narrative, with only a brief mention of the Women’s Citizens Associations which incorrectly identifies them as a post-war phenomenon and affords little space to a consideration of how their attempts to educate women into a sense of citizenship were received in different parts of the country [p. 51]. Having said this, however, Law has still provided us with perhaps the fullest exploration of post-1918 British feminism to date. The detail she does include, especially on parliament and legislative campaigning, will be welcomed, and serve as a timely reminder that feminism did not stop in 1918 to be reactivated in the 1960s. This may not be a description of the whole women’s movement of the twentieth century, but it certainly reclaims the 1920s from accusations that it was a time without a women’s movement.

Notes

1. Dale Spender, *There’s Always Been a Women’s Movement This Century*, (London; Pandora, 1983), p. ii. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries* (Oxford; Clarendon, 1987), p. 80. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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