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Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement

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As Sandra Holton herself admits, historians of women's suffrage, especially those whose main research interests lie with the British campaigns, frequently encounter the view that suffrage has been 'done' and that there really cannot be anything left to say on this topic. It is true that since the emergence of women's history in the 1970s campaigns for women's suffrage have constantly been reassessed. Yet many stones remain unturned and there is still much work to be done on the subject. This important book provides an insight into just how little knowledge we still have about the lives, actions and motivations of all but a handful of suffragists and suffragettes, and Dr Holton has done a splendid job both in opening up completely fresh areas for debate, and going over old ground from a slightly different angle. The book takes as its main focus the lives of seven individuals prior to and during their involvement in campaigns for the extension of the parliamentary franchise to British women. Their individual stories are told along with the larger story in which their activism played a part. This approach allows for the revelation on many differing perspectives on the suffrage campaign.

A somewhat surprising omission within the book, given its concern with comparing the varied perspectives

of individuals is a detailed explanation as to why these particular individuals were selected. The seven presented here form a somewhat disparate body. There are common backgrounds between some of them, and friendship links between others, but Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, Jessie Craigen, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Hannah Mitchell, Mary Gawthorpe, Laurence Houseman and Alice Clark have little in common collectively outside of a common determination to achieve the female parliamentary vote. Some more information as to the motivation of her choice would have been welcome, especially as Dr Holton admits that they were not a group in life, and are one here only because she as a historian has chosen to make them so. Leaving this aside, in uniting them, Dr Holton marvelously weaves their lives together and recreates their 'suffrage days' in a way that provides a glimpse of how dynamic a period this was. Narrative is a key concern within this book, and Dr Holton makes no apologies for the fact that she intends to 'tell a story.' This she does with skill, yet the book provides more than an entertaining tale. As various well-known events are retold through the lives of these different individuals, less accessible factors simultaneously emerge, and suffrage is repositioned as something far more than just a single-issue campaign.

Although several of the seven protagonists undertook paid work on behalf of suffrage organisations, none of them can be classified as being part of the leadership of any organisation. One obvious advantage in selecting figures beyond the leadership of a movement is that this allows for an examination of a fresh set of perspectives beyond the preoccupations of national executives. This is of crucial importance within the history of suffrage where the original hostilities between the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the older non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) have been, and continue to be replicated within the histories of both organisations. Thus the somewhat heroic accounts of the activities of the WSPU's suffragettes by authors such as MacKenzie and Rosen were subjected to bitter critique within the 1978 work of Liddington and Norris. Their study of suffrage in Lancashire dismissed the WSPU as being largely an irrelevance, dominated by upper and middle-class, anti-socialist women. In its place they held up a new category of 'radical suffragists', pro-socialist women locating their suffrage activity within the NUWSS. Since then there has been a tendency, despite the best efforts of historians such as Liz Stanley and Leah Leneman, to write polarised suffrage history which is either pro or anti-WSPU. An obvious danger in this approach is that it can ignore what was going on at the grass-roots of the suffrage movement where individual friendship networks often transcended political differences between national leaderships. Another problem is that the contributions made by members of other organisations (or indeed those suffrage campaigners who did not join any official group) are dismissed through histories which are concerned with replicating a power struggle between two national groups. Hence the need for non-leadership studies such as this one which can decisively move the agenda away from accounts of WSPU/NUWSS rivalry. Looking at suffrage through the eyes of these lesser-known figures allows Dr Holton to explore many categories of suffrage activist besides the somewhat well-trodden ones of 'militant' or 'constitutional.' Under her careful handling of separate life stories 'working-class', 'bohemian' 'friendship' and 'kinship' emerge as equally uniting ties within the broader movement.

At a first glance, given the somewhat biographical perspective of the book, it might be possible to mistake this for a work of recovery of the type practised in the early nineteen seventies which re-presented once famous women for inclusion in the historical canon on grounds of their sex alone. If this were the case, it would not necessarily detract from the book's importance. Some of the figures whose stories form the main part of the narrative are iconographically famous but biographically anonymous. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, for example, whose frail, elderly frame headed many Edwardian suffrage demonstrations is instantly recognisable to students and scholars of suffrage alike though her ubiquitous and visually memorable presence at major events. However, prior to this book, even the most avid collector of suffrage data would have been hard-pressed to provide much information about her apart from her name. Recovery may be open to criticism as over-simplistic and under-theorised in approach, but it was, and remains an essential stage in creating the discipline of women's history. Significant individuals must be identified and their lives unearthed before they can be deconstructed. Dr Holton is quick to admit that recovery remains an important part of her purpose, but there is much more to the book than this, as the inclusion of better known figures such as Hannah Mitchell and Mary Gawthorpe demonstrates. Both these women published autobiographies (although Gawthorpe's is only available in a rare American edition) and as such can be included amongst

suffragettes whose lives are readily available. Their appearance here makes it apparent that this book extends beyond the aims of recovery alone. It is motivated more by a desire to reveal fresh perspectives than fresh narratives, although it is sometimes difficult to find the former without constructing the latter.

A further aim of this work appears to be a desire to situate women's suffrage as something more than a brief, single-issue campaign. One of the most original and interesting facets of the book is the light which it throws on earlier radical links. Dr Holton's chronology extends from 1865 to 1918. This is not the most obvious choice for a work on women's suffrage. There was a flurry of activity around the question in the mid-1860s which is often presented as a precursor to the 'real' campaigns from the mid-1890s onwards. The work on the early career of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and on the hitherto obscure campaigning of Jessie Craigen show a different side to this. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy is frequently cited as an example of continuity within suffrage campaigns, mainly on account of her extreme age (she was 75 when she led the WSPU demonstration in Hyde Park in 1908, an event pictured on the cover of this book). Here, it is made clear exactly what it is that she represents continuity with. She is situated directly in a network of radical campaigning women for whom the parliamentary vote is just part of a broader attempt to revolutionise the social status of their sex. Dr Holton identifies them as 'Radical suffragists', presumably using the capital 'R' to distinguish between the earlier 'radical suffragist' label devised by Liddington and Norris. Such nomenclature is valuable when attempting to identify groups and patterns of involvement within the often multi-faceted world of suffrage campaigning. However, it would have been perhaps a more useful category had the author been more bold in expounding her definition. Little is offered by way of explanation for the term other than that it stands in opposition to 'moderate suffragist' as a means of avoiding the 'radical/conservative' dichotomy. This is a shame, as there obviously is a great need to put names to many of the trends which have emerged in recent suffrage historiography which do not sit comfortably under the existing dichotomies of militant/constitutional or suffragist/suffragette. Yet there is no disputing that these 'Radical suffragist' women were radical in politics and in lifestyle., nor that they formed an opposition to more sedate suffrage campaigners. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy enters the narrative as an early member of the Kensington Society, a debating society which in turn was a spin-off from the cradle of English Feminism, the Langham Place Circle. Although she was a corresponding member, residing some distance away in Manchester, this nevertheless put her in contact with women such as Barbara Leigh Smith who provided the somewhat younger Wolstenholme Elmy with a direct link back to Smith's own political apprenticeship in the Anti-Corn Law League. Hence it appears that suffrage was not a purely feminist demand but was also part of a broader set of demands for radical reform. Personal friendship links are the way in which Holton explores the broader dimensions and wider political links of suffrage. In the case of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, they reveal, amongst others, concerns with the reform of the Married Women's Property Act; the ideas of free sexual union promoted by Fourier; and the expansion of women's employment and educational opportunities, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The position of women in society and a broader concept of female citizenship appears to have been much more of a motivating factor than a single demand for female suffrage. Holton also shows how the division of the Edwardian suffrage movement into 'militant' and 'moderate' wings was no dramatic change, but a continuity of discussions around just how radical early feminism was to be. The ostracisation of Elizabeth Wolstenholme, as she was, following her 'free union' with Ben Elmy shows how few women were prepared to tolerate radicalism in the private rather than the public sphere. Holton argues too that there was a political dimension to such divisions. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy was becoming increasingly involved with northern suffragists. This group were vigorous opponents of any attempt to exclude married women from a franchise bill.

Political ostracisation was also the fate of Jessie Craigen, probably the least well-known figure in the book. Her inclusion allows for a further dimension of suffrage campaigning, that of class, to be explored as she is presented as an erratic, independent figure from a working class background introduced a class perspective into the movement from the 1870s. The way that the more moderate suffragists responded both to her style of very public campaigning and to her insistence on broadening suffrage demands to press for wider social reform demonstrates that much of the later divisions between militant and constitutional campaigns had deep roots. Further explorations of such divisions may prove profitable for historians interested in questions

of identity and organisational affiliation amongst Edwardian suffrage workers. This account of Craigen's life also demonstrates the almost obsessive emphasis that many of the anti-radical suffragists placed on 'respectability.' It appears that she was encouraged to alter her 'uncouth' dress and habits for the sake of the movement. It may be possible to account for this in terms of convention, but Dr Holton also situates it as an issue of class differences. Women like Jessie Craigen had no option other than to take a salary for their suffrage work, and it appears that this made it impossible for much of the middle-class leadership of the late Victorian suffrage movement to differentiate between their personal servants and such paid suffrage workers. Here, Dr Holton is making a very important point. It is possibly phenomena such as this which led to the emergence of the WSPU as much as tactical differences, and this point merits further investigation.

Within the later chapters which focus on better-known figures, there is still much fresh material to interest. The chapters concentrating on the lives of working-class activists Hannah Mitchell and Mary Gawthorpe, for example, provide an interesting critique of previous conceptions of the class basis of the WSPU. The political life-stories of these two working-class women begin with their conversion to socialism, through which route they came to suffrage. The final defection of the once socialist WSPU leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst to the Conservative Party after the First World War has led many historians to underestimate their original socialist convictions. The origins of this line of thinking can be taken back to Sylvia Pankhurst. She remained socialist and was unable to resist the temptation to notice signs of her sister's 'incipient Toryism' within her history of the WSPU. Such an approach fails to acknowledge that the WSPU was originally set up as a 'ginger group' by women within the Independent Labour Party, and it is nice to see Dr Holton remind us of this fact. She shows clearly how suffrage and socialism were indivisible for many women in the early days of the WSPU. Socialist women spent much time and effort developing militant suffrage campaigns, so it is, perhaps, not very surprising to find that many remained loyal to both issues, despite an official decree that such dual affiliations were impossible. The chapter on Laurence Houseman allows for an investigation of the position of men within women's suffrage. To an extent Dr Holton is unfortunate in the timing of her work here. The publication of the results of an extensive study into 'the men's share' headed by Professor Angela John will, understandably, overshadow the parts of this book which deal with suffrage from a sympathetic male perspective. Nevertheless, the role of men within the suffrage movement has been massively neglected prior to now, and Dr Holton's efforts in this area must be commended. Also of interest here is Dr Holton's classification of Houseman as a 'bohemian.' Although there has been a little work done on the work done by actresses and artists for the suffrage cause, the links between the two groups, and the extent to which suffrage was part of an alternative lifestyle for many remains obscure, and it is to be hoped that this identification of suffrage with bohemianism encourages future work in this direction.

Further fresh channels are opened through the material on transatlantic suffrage links interpreted via the figure of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The international dimension of suffrage is one which has been given very little consideration to date. This may seem an understandable omission, as suffrage campaigns were concerned with altering the law within individual nation states to allow women a voice in their governments. However, the most basic research within the suffrage press uncovers a wealth of international material. Suffrage campaigners always celebrated each others' achievements, and frequently referenced each other within their work. Here, Dr Holton shows how many of these international links pre-dated the first enfranchisement of women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a well known American campaigner is resituated in the heart of the radical suffrage circle of the Priestman family through personal links going back to the anti-slavery movement in the 1840s. Elizabeth's daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch, married an Englishman and became secretary of the radical Women's Franchise League in the 1890s, ensuring a continuity of personal contacts. However, Dr Holton also draws out political similarities. These links are between the radical wings of both British and American suffrage movements where she traces a strong will to include all women in franchise legislation, something which the more conservative British campaigners resisted. It would have been interesting to see this argument developed more, perhaps with a comparison of organisational methods and tactics between the two movements.

On the question of militancy, one feels that the book could maybe have delivered more. The reasons for

holding back from this are, to a certain extent, appreciable. The undue focus on militancy has been criticised by Dr Holton herself in an earlier work for perpetuating the restriction of suffrage history within the old WSPU/NUWSS divide. However, in this book, she has some very interesting things to say about the origins of suffrage militancy, locating them within a longstanding radical political tradition. It would have been nice to see this pushed further, and the important question of why such actions, if part of a long tradition, became so remarkable when adopted by an all-female organisation. Moreover, in some areas, Dr Holton begins to expand conventional definitions of militancy, such as in her account of the views of Alice Clark who loaned moral and physical support to the WSPU, participating in some of their militant demonstrations, yet remained a member of the NUWSS. Such definitions are welcome, and merit further exploration. If support for the WSPU is taken as the yardstick against which militancy is measured, all the British individuals in this book could be said to be, in some way, militant. Only Laurence Houseman fits the conventional picture of supporting early militancy, drawing back only as it increases in violence, but Dr Holton is right to point out that he viewed acts such as tax-resistance as suitable militant protests. Whilst militancy has perhaps take up too much of the attention of suffrage historians in the past, it nevertheless remained a crucial division between suffrage campaigners themselves. However, too little attention has been paid in the past to defining what actually was seen as militancy by these campaigners. When the definition is expanded to include tax-resistance, some interesting questions as to why female militancy was so broadly condemned emerge, and it is slightly disappointing that the book does not really take these up.

It is perhaps inevitable that there will be some gaps within a work of this nature which examines seven individual perspectives on one campaign. It is true that there are many more questions raised than are actually answered by the text, but this in itself is not a bad thing. If nothing else, this should encourage fresh directions for research as future suffrage historians press for answers to these questions, raising their own new queries in the process. Furthermore, this book presents a fascinating picture of the suffrage campaign in which the major figures are reduced to the historical margins. This may be somewhat disorientating at first, but as one goes on it becomes apparent that this is probably closer to the way in which most participants experienced the campaign than the participatory accounts of the leadership. New friendship networks identify new individuals allowing the perspective to alter again. As Dr Holton concludes, 'the kaleidoscope keeps on turning.' Fresh material will always come to light and new ways of looking at histories emerge. Even with the contributions made by this highly enjoyable book, suffrage history can, in no way, be said to be complete.

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