RISE UP, WOMEN!

The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903–1914

Andrew Rosen

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To My Parents

Acknowledgments

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Andrew Rosen

Introduction

In British history there are relatively few topics of broad interest which have not, at some time, been written upon. The militant campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union is certainly no exception; women's fight for the vote has been described in numerous autobiographies, in secondary accounts of a popular nature, and in general works on the history of the women's suffrage movement as a whole. The most important of the autobiographies written by those who were active in the WSPU have been Annie Kenney's *Memories of a Militant* (1924), E. Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* (1931), Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's *My Part in a Changing World* (1938), Frederick William Pethick-Lawrence's *Fate Has Been Kind* (1943), and Dame Christabel Pankhurst's *Unshackled* (1959).* Without doubt, the most widely-read secondary account of the suffragettes has been that contained in George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1936).† A more recent but less penetrating account is Antonia Raeburn's *The Militant Suffragettes* (1973).‡ Finally, the standard works on the women's suffrage movement as a whole – that is, general works describing the movement from its inception in 1867 to either 1914 or to the winning of the vote in 1918 – have been Ray Strachey's *The Cause* (1926), Roger Fulford's *Votes for Women* (1957), and, more recently, Dr Constance Rover's *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914* (1967).§

* For comments on *The Suffragette Movement*, see fn. *, pp. 15–16.

† For comments on *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, see p. 213 and fn. *, p. 237.

‡ Largely an anecdotal account of the personal experiences of individual suffragettes. The author does not attempt to capture the complexity of the WSPU, her approach to which is both simplistic and uncritical.

§ *The Cause* and *Votes for Women* are both surveys primarily based on secondary sources. The brief biographies contained in the appendix of *Votes for Women* are, however, invaluable. *Women's Suffrage and*

Curiously enough, despite the number of books devoted entirely or in part to the history of the fight for women's enfranchisement, no full length scholarly monograph based on extensive research into archival source material has yet been devoted to the Women's Social and Political Union. The explanation for this somewhat curious lack is not hard to come by; as recently as 1966, when I first became seriously interested in the WSPU, militant feminism was still regarded by most professional historians as something of an historical curiosity – interesting enough in its own right, but certainly a most minor tributary to the main streams of social history, if, indeed, a tributary at all. As a result of this attitude, professional historians had paid no more than passing attention to women's suffrage movements, with the consequence that, as none of the existing works touching on the suffragettes had been grounded in extensive archival research, many of the most important sources for the history of the WSPU had never been used. To give but a few examples, neither the journals of H. W. Nevinson, nor the secret correspondence between Christabel Pankhurst and A. J. Balfour, nor the Arncliffe-Sennett Collection, nor the papers of Teresa Billington-Greig, nor the reports of the Metropolitan Police, nor the Sylvia Pankhurst Papers deposited at the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam, had been made use of by anyone writing on the WSPU. Moreover, a number of published but obscure sources, such as Emily Wilding Davison's essay, 'The Price of Liberty' (see p. 199), were completely unknown, the annual reports of the WSPU had not been mined, and the myriad ephemeral articles, speeches, and statements to the press which had emanated from the leaders of the WSPU remained buried in a host of forgotten newspaper columns. Finally, the papers of those politicians most affected by the militant campaign – Asquith, Lloyd George, Herbert Gladstone, and their colleagues – had not been consulted with regard to the

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Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914, is the most recent and the most scholarly general treatment of the various women's suffrage organizations and the vexed political situation they encountered. Dr Rover is insufficiently empathetic with the Liberals' very real political dilemmas, but hers is the only published work to date which has attempted to dissect political parties' attitudes towards the women's suffrage question. For additional comment, see fn. *, p. 9.

light they might shed on the Liberal Government's reaction to the suffragettes.

In making use of these and other sources, I have been particularly interested in the origins and underlying patterns of militancy, the political efficacy (or inefficacy) of the WSPU's tactics, and the effect of those tactics on the ideology and organizational structure of the WSPU. I have also been concerned with the Union's almost intimate relationship with those politicians who, by blocking the passage of women's suffrage legislation for so many years, were directly responsible for bringing about the exasperation of the suffragettes at the apparently complete inefficacy of conventional methods of agitation. Finally, I have attempted to assess the character of the final and most extreme phase of militancy – the arson campaign of 1913–14 – and I have been struck by the extent to which the WSPU in its two final years came to resemble, in certain respects, millenarian movements of other eras.

In writing this history I have striven to construct an account which is faithful not only to the facts as I found them, but faithful in affect as well – I have tried to write history which is evocative as well as accurate. In connection with this effort, a few questions of usage arose in which decisions that were to some extent arbitrary seemed called for.

With regard to the use and non-use of the prefixes Miss and Mrs, I decided to follow the usages generally prevalent within the WSPU: for example, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and Mrs Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence were known to all but a few intimate friends as Mrs Pankhurst and Mrs Pethick-Lawrence, and they have been referred to thus in these pages, whereas Christabel Pankhurst and Sylvia Pankhurst were usually referred to as Christabel and Sylvia – there were, after all, three Misses Pankhurst in the WSPU – and I have frequently referred to them by their first names. Neither disrespect nor undue familiarity will, it is hoped, be construed from this practice. To have referred consistently to Christabel Pankhurst by her full name would, I think, have established a degree of formality not present in the WSPU, and would have failed to convey a sense of that intimacy through which, as Christabel, she became idolized by her followers.

A question of usage also arose with regard to direct quotations from newspaper accounts of speeches: Edwardian and Georgian newspapers, in reporting speeches and interviews, frequently changed first person pronouns to third person pronouns – 'I' and 'we' became 'she', 'he', and 'they', and corresponding changes in syntax were made. For example, on 4 July 1896 the *Manchester Guardian* quoted Mrs Pankhurst as saying, 'she was aware when she spoke that very likely proceedings would be instituted against her.' Despite the lack of complete fidelity to all the original words, such newspaper reports often constitute the most accurate available accounts of important statements, and I have on occasion quoted such reports rather than resorting to paraphrase. I have, on the other hand, completely avoided the use of any of the highly suspect dialogue introduced into so many personal memoirs by WSPU members – such memoirs were usually written twenty to forty years after the words quoted were allegedly spoken, and I have found that over such lengthy periods the unaided human memory is an unreliable recorder of events, let alone of what people actually said.

Matters of usage aside, some definition of topic may be helpful: my subtitle – 'The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903–1914' – is intended to describe accurately the subject of this book. I have not attempted to chronicle the doings of the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, nor have I attempted to analyse with any completeness the history of women's suffrage legislation, though I have discussed in some detail the necessarily close relationship between political leaders, parliamentary affairs, and the tactics of the WSPU, and I have also analysed in detail the factors which led to the passage of women's suffrage legislation in 1916–18.

In conclusion, I would add that in my subtitle and elsewhere I have used the word 'militant' as it was used by the women of the WSPU: by militant I do not necessarily mean illegal or violent – though most of the activities called militant were illegal, and many were violent – rather, I refer to a wide spectrum of tactics chosen by the WSPU precisely because its leaders knew that conventional society would regard those tactics as acts of social and political bellicosity when employed by women. Broadly defined, militant tactics were those tactics sufficiently

combative as to be widely regarded as shocking, and therefore worthy of comment – comment being exactly what the WSPU sought; the militant campaign was based on the perception that the use of 'shocking' tactics, by evoking discussion, would create substantial public interest in a cause which had previously seemed virtually moribund.

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