

REVOLUTIONARY LIVES



SYLVIA PANKHURST



SUFFRAGETTE, SOCIALIST
and SCOURGE of EMPIRE

KATHERINE CONNELLY

Sylvia Pankhurst

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and Scourge of Empire

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Sylvia Pankhurst

Revolutionary Lives

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Revolutionary Lives is a series of short, critical biographies of radical figures from throughout history. The books are sympathetic but not sycophantic, and the intention is to present a balanced and, where necessary, critical evaluation of the individual's place in their political field, putting their actions and achievements in context and exploring issues raised by their lives, such as the use or rejection of violence, nationalism, or gender in political activism. While individuals are the subject of the books, their personal lives are dealt with lightly except insofar as they mesh with political concerns. The focus is on the contribution these revolutionaries made to history, an examination of how far they achieved their aims in improving the lives of the oppressed and exploited, and how they can continue to be an inspiration for many today.

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Introduction

The solitary Suffragette who presented herself was able to walk quietly in unnoticed and to take a seat in the middle of the room. If her heart beat so loud that it seemed that all must hear it, if she felt sick and faint with suspense, no one knew.¹

In the midst of the vast Liberal Party rally just before the 1906 general election, the suffragette waited to ask her question, steeling herself for the violent ejection that invariably followed. The speaker was Winston Churchill, well-known for his particularly ‘insulting attitude’ towards women’s suffrage. When the suffragette stood up and asked her question, ‘Will the Liberal Government give women the vote?’, he just ignored her. The ‘votes for women’ banner in her hand was snatched from her, but when some of the men in the audience demanded an answer the chairman invited the suffragette to ask her question from the platform. After doing so, Churchill took her roughly by the arm and forced her into a seat on the platform saying, ‘No, you must wait here till you have heard what I have to say’, and told the audience ‘Nothing would induce me to vote for giving women the franchise.’ Suddenly all the men on the platform stood up, blocking the suffragette from view, while others pushed her into a back room.² One man went to find a key to lock her in, while another, standing against the door, ‘began to use the most violent language and, calling her a cat, gesticulated as though he would scratch her face with his hands’.³ She ran to the barred window and called out to the people in the street. The threatening man left and the crowd pointed out a window with some bars missing which the suffragette climbed through and then, at the crowd’s request, delivered an impromptu speech of her own.

Forty-two years later, and 20 years after all women in Britain won the right to vote, Winston Churchill was still in the House of Commons. On the road outside was a 62-year-old woman in a

group holding placards demanding an end to British colonialism in Africa.

In both instances the woman was Sylvia Pankhurst. But what, other than the woman involved, connected the militant suffragette movement to the struggle against colonialism after the Second World War? Sometimes biography enables us to see an alternative political history that upsets the dominant narrative about how political change is achieved.

Standard syllabuses of British political history tend to portray an ascending trajectory of political reform – the reforms drawn up on the Parliamentary benches – punctuated briefly by a few, seemingly unlinked, protests. The story of Sylvia Pankhurst's life – the story from the perspective of the protester locked out of the political meeting and demonstrating on the streets – shows this was never the case. She was a leading suffragette who broke away from the elitism of the suffragette campaign organised by her mother and sister by building a women's suffrage campaign that put working-class women at the forefront of fighting for the vote. In the First World War she campaigned against the intensified exploitation and suffering it brought to working people. She was among the first socialists to champion the Bolshevik revolution, inspired by the soviets which placed direct democracy in the hands of ordinary people. In the 1920s she was one of the first people in Britain to identify the danger posed by the rise of fascism in Italy to democratic freedoms and to peace. At a time when Churchill was proclaiming his admiration for Mussolini she was campaigning against British appeasement of fascism. Her uncompromising opposition to fascism enabled her to be in the forefront of raising awareness about the horror of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935; a campaign that led her into resisting British attempts to colonise Ethiopia and other parts of Africa after the war.

Despite her lifelong political activism it is for her work as a suffragette, over a period of only ten years of her life, that she is best known. Her role has been written out of not only the dominant historical narratives of twentieth-century politics, but also many studies of the left. In part, this is because after 1921 she was not affiliated to any organisation and so has been

difficult to 'claim' as part of a tradition. Many studies of British anti-fascism fail to even mention her unique contribution to this struggle.

Sylvia was above all profoundly committed to a radical, far-reaching conception of democracy for women, for workers and for people struggling to overthrow the dominance of Empire. Her experience of this struggle was that change had to be forced on the privileged classes at Westminster and the gains had to be constantly defended. For those in today's social movements who want to change the world, Sylvia's ideas, campaigns and the dilemmas she was confronted with are more important than we have been led to believe.

1

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

THE PANKHURSTS

I was a child of the late nineteenth century, an inheritor of the struggle for political democracy, not fully accomplished then even for men, whilst women were still outside the political system, profiting by the gains of democracy only adventitiously. The Labour movement for the economic betterment of the masses was stirring towards its birth. The idea of internationalism, in the sense that the world is every man's country, to be valued and respected equally with his birthplace, was gaining ground.¹

These words, written by Sylvia Pankhurst in 1938, describe the struggles which informed her whole life: the struggles for democracy, women's rights, working-class emancipation, internationalism, and against imperialism.

She was born into a political family at a time of intense political turmoil. Her parents, Emmeline Goulden and Dr Richard Marsden Pankhurst, both came from big Liberal families in Manchester, the city of manufacture and commerce that epitomised nineteenth-century Liberalism. Emmeline Goulden was the eldest daughter of Robert Goulden, a partner in a cotton printing and bleaching firm and local Liberal councillor. Richard Pankhurst, the son of a Liberal Baptist Dissenter, worked as a barrister. In the late 1870s the Conservative government allied itself with the repressive Turkish Empire, almost dragging Britain into war with Russia, and fought unpopular and disastrous wars in Afghanistan and South Africa. Emmeline and Richard met in the ferment of the antiwar agitation championed by the Liberal Party, and married in 1879. They shared a passion for radical politics and challenging injustice; in their short courtship Richard wrote to Emmeline 'every struggling cause shall be ours'.²

Only 21 when she married, Emmeline had attended her first women's suffrage meeting at the age of 14. Richard, who was 20 years older, had been involved in politics for far longer. He declared himself a republican in the 1870s, campaigned for the abolition of the House of Lords, was a prominent supporter of women's suffrage and Home Rule for Ireland, and championed the Mechanics Institutes, which pioneered working-class higher education.

In 1880 their first child, Christabel Harriette, was born, and became, by all accounts, her mother's favourite child. On the 5th of May 1882 their second child Estelle Sylvia was born. The name Estelle, which had been chosen by her mother, was swiftly rejected by the independent-minded child who insisted on using her middle name which had been chosen by her father, something that perhaps strengthened the very close relationship she had with him. Three more children followed: Henry Francis Robert (Frank) was born in 1884, but died in 1888, Adela Constantia Mary was born in 1885, and Henry Francis (Harry) in 1889.

A year after Sylvia's birth, Richard Pankhurst declared his intention to run in a Manchester by-election, publicly backed by his father-in-law Robert Goulden whose home the Pankhursts had moved into. However, since the Liberal Party had come into office in 1880 all the idealism it expressed in opposition had melted away. Richard resigned from the local Liberal Association and ran as an independent candidate, openly criticising the Liberal government's repressive policies in India and Ireland.³ He was to pay a high price for his radical programme. Even though the only other candidate in the election was a Conservative, the Liberal Association called on its members not to vote for Richard Pankhurst and the Liberal press attacked him as a 'wild extremist'.⁴ Richard lost the election and his rebellious stance saw him subject to a professional boycott. His reaction to this would generate profound political and personal changes for the Pankhurst family.

ALL THAT IS SOLID MELTS INTO AIR:
THE POLITICS OF THE 1880s

Immediately after the 1883 election Richard helped found a Radical Association to challenge the Liberals and took up the case of a fruit and vegetable salesman against the powerful Corporation of Manchester.⁵ This was all rather too much for the respectable businessman Robert Goulden to tolerate, especially as he found his own business was now being boycotted. After a series of bitter arguments the Pankhursts left the Goulden home and moved to London. Emmeline never spoke to her father again. It was instilled into Sylvia from an early age that principles came first no matter what the financial or personal cost.

The Pankhursts' political trajectory reflected the wider social and political developments of the 1880s. The antiwar movement of the late 1870s had radicalised many of its supporters who, like Richard Pankhurst, became disillusioned with the Liberal government and began to look for new ideas which resonated with their desire for radical social change. New radical and socialist organisations sprang up: the Democratic Federation, established in 1881, became the more socialist Social Democratic Federation in 1884, and in the same year the Fabian Society and the Socialist League were formed. In 1886 a demonstration protesting at the destitution faced by the unemployed turned violent and leading socialists were put on trial. A year later a demonstration in Trafalgar Square against repression in Ireland was met by mounted police who attacked the protestors on what became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. In response, campaigns for free speech were launched. In 1888 hundreds of matchwomen in East London went on strike, marched on Parliament, formed a union and won their dispute. Their action inspired other groups of workers, who were classed as 'unskilled' and left unorganised by the trade unions, to take militant strike action and form their own unions. A year after the matchwomen, the gas workers struck, swiftly followed by the Great Dock Strike which galvanised hundreds of thousands of workers into activity and a wave of strike action across the country. This was described as New Unionism and it was evident why:

in 1889 union membership had stood at 860,000, by 1890 it stood at nearly 2 million.⁶ New Unionism marked a level of working-class militancy and self-organisation that had not been seen since the Chartist movement in the 1840s. In ten years the landscape of stale political certainties had been transformed into one characterised by strikes, protests and acute social tensions.

In 1885 Richard Pankhurst again stood unsuccessfully for Parliament, but this time as a Radical for the London constituency of Rotherhithe. In the mid 1880s Richard and Emmeline continued their political trajectory away from their Liberal Party backgrounds, joining the moderate socialist Fabian Society and participating in the free speech agitation. But like many of the moderate socialists they had only marginal contact with New Unionism – apart from mixing with some of the labour movement leaders and donating money to the matchwomen's strike fund, they kept their distance from the huge strike wave.

EMANCIPATION BEGINS AT HOME

Whereas many suffragette memoirs tell of childhood battles for the right, as daughters, to spend time reading, Sylvia Pankhurst recalled of her London childhood: 'we chose what books we pleased at the London Library, and any in the house; there were no barriers'.⁷ The enlightened Dr Pankhurst encouraged his daughters to read voraciously: 'For many years he brought a book home to us every night; history, travel, simple science, astronomy, botany, chemistry, engineering, fairy-tales, standard novels, reproductions of works of art, the best illustrations.'⁸ He read them the radical poetry of Shelley and Whitman, and Sylvia's writings about her early life are filled with the vivid impressions from her childhood reading.⁹ Imaginative and emotional, Sylvia was haunted by the depictions of poverty in Dickens's novels: 'they dealt me horrible dreams and sleepless nights; but they made real for me the cause of the People and the Poor. The miseries of *Oliver Twist* and the other exploited children bit deep into my little heart.'¹⁰

Defying the social expectation that young middle-class women should concentrate on getting married and confining themselves to the home, Sylvia recalled that her father impressed upon his daughters the importance of working for a living: ‘When we were still but toddlers he was for ever asking us: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and urging: “Get something to earn your living by that you like and can do.”’¹¹

Sylvia’s vocation, from very early childhood, was art, and this was encouraged despite the precarity of an artistic profession. She was deeply influenced by the art produced by Walter Crane for the labour movement, such as his drawings celebrating May Day, and by William Morris’s evocations of egalitarian societies – in particular she was struck by Morris’s illustration accompanying the lines ‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman’, in his *A Dream of John Ball* (1888).¹² Her earliest ideas about art were thus inextricably linked with the struggle for a better world, and one of her earliest ambitions was to make that struggle itself beautiful, aesthetically uplifting and inspiring:

I would be a decorative painter; I would portray the world that is to be when poverty is no more. I would decorate halls where people would foregather in the movement to win the new world, and make banners for the meetings and processions. I had been with my parents to meetings of the social [*sic*] Democratic Federation in dingy rooms in back streets, and to drab and dreary demonstrations in Hyde Park; I wanted to make these beautiful.¹³

The Pankhursts’ unusual childhood was compounded by the fact that their mother refused to allow them to go to school while they lived in London, declaring that ‘I want to develop their individuality above all things.’¹⁴ They were therefore erratically educated by a series of governesses and derived an extensive political awareness at the meetings their parents held, attended by figures from across the contemporary radical movements: ‘The house was soon a centre for many gatherings, of Socialists, Fabians, Anarchists, Suffragists, Free Thinkers, Radicals and Humanitarians of all schools.’¹⁵