SEPARATE SPHERES

The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain

Brian Harrison

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Volume 20

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
NLOWS	National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers
WLGS	Women's Local Government Society

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

References to the sources which have been consulted are listed at the end of each chapter; in each individual footnote, references are first supplied for the sources quoted in the text, in order of appearance, followed by references to other relevant sources. Place of publication is supplied only for books published outside London. A full reference is supplied for each source in the footnote to the first citation in each chapter.

I gratefully acknowledge here the invaluable help I have received from Professor J.P.C. Roach, of Sheffield University, on James Fitzjames Stephen; from Mrs Helen Moyes (née Fraser) and Mrs Gertrude Horton on Gladys Pott; from Professor Richard Cosgrave, of the College of Liberal Arts, University of Arizona, on A.V. Dicey; from John MacCallum Scott, on his father; and from Mrs Leeming of Worcester, for access to her superb collection of suffrage postcards. Remarkably generous help has been extended to me by experts on the medical aspects of my subject: Professor Martin Vessey, of the Department of Social Medicine, Oxford University; Dr Sheila T. Callender, Consultant in Medicine at the Nuffield Department of Clinical Medicine, Oxford; Professor Roger Short, of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Edinburgh; and my colleague Professor David Grahame-Smith.

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The tape-recorded interviews I have conducted with participants in

the twentieth-century British women's movement – with the aid of a grant from the Social Science Research Council – have been helpful at several points. I wish the late Lady Ricardo, Maude Kate Smith and Dr Letitia Fairfield were able to read this appreciation of their generosity, more tangible than I was able to offer them at the time. Mrs Gwen Coleman of Shiplake, Miss Jessie Stephen of Bedminster and Mrs Leonora Cohen of Rhos-on-Sea not only gave me interviews which were memorable in more ways than one: they also gave me permission to quote from them. More particular obligations are acknowledged in individual footnotes.

FOR A.B.J.

PREFACE

I am rather surprised to find myself writing a book about the opposition to woman suffrage. I did not at first intend to do so. The subject interested me only as part of a larger enquiry begun four years ago into women's organisations in Britain between 1900 and 1940. I felt that sense could be made of the woman suffrage movement – of its attitudes, tactics and overall flavour – only by studying its enemy. So I read some anti-suffrage periodicals and biographies and wrote one of those hasty seminar papers with which some university teachers have to clothe their nakedness when caught midway between one piece of research which has been published and another which has hardly yet begun. I felt that this investigation would assist the larger project, but it was also interesting in its own right. Parts of it were scribbled down on the train from Oxford to London on 3 March 1975, when I was already *en route* to deliver it for the first time. Parts of it never got written down at all.

Historical, and perhaps all, research never proceeds in a straight line. I found that my seminar paper provoked discussions which interested me, and convinced me that I might even perhaps have something to say. I began to read more widely, though still persisting with my broader interest in the women's movement as a whole. A widening divergence followed between the paper I had originally written and the completely rewritten version of it which was forming in my mind. But when I began rewriting, one article grew into two, and two articles grew into a small book. The sheer interest of British anti-suffragism led me to hope that its history would, if published in book form, reach more readers than an academic article. I also hoped that the discussions provoked by my seminar paper would continue on a broader plane, and so assist the growth of academic writing on British women's history.

Historians, as creatures of their time, acquire a host of debts in the course of research which it is a pleasure to acknowledge. Here I thank those who heard my seminar paper and whose sympathy with my aims – if not always with my conclusions – led them to ask questions which turned out to be fruitful for me; several other debts are acknowledged under that heading and in the footnotes. I have a larger obligation; the controversial nature of my subject led me naturally to my dedication.

With my first book I acknowledged my debt to my father. With this book, I acknowledge my debt to my sixth-form history master at Merchant Taylors' School, Northwood, during the 1950s – Alexander Jeffries. His interest in his subject was infectious, his skill in encouraging younger historians was remarkable. But I was not alone in finding his personality more remarkable still. He and one or two other masters constituted for me a sort of oasis in a rugby-football-obsessed all-male institution where life would otherwise have been bleak indeed. It is a much pleasanter place now, but with Alex Jeffries' retirement it lost a history master who took the trouble to relate history to his own and his pupils' direct experience, and whose learning seemed to have moulded his whole temperament. It had given him high standards, yet an unfailing good humour and wisdom: passion on some subjects, yet always receptiveness to argument: breadth of interests and sympathy, yet also, one suspected, firmly held beliefs: and above all, tolerance and humanity of an unfailing and positive kind which seemed at the time almost a revelation. Subsequent experience has served only to convince me how rare these qualities are. When embarking on so controversial a subject as this, I was inevitably drawn into thinking of him.

Brian Harrison

1 APOLOGIA

At a suffragette entertainment in Holloway Prison in 1912, a suffragette prisoner put a button in her eye and posed as the monocled anti-suffrage leader, Lord Cromer, making a speech.[1] She was carrying forward the tradition well established within the British women's movement of ridiculing its opponents. The non-militant suffragist leader Mrs Fawcett was as keen on such an approach as any militant: 'the Antis offer a splendid field for chaff,' she wrote privately to Lady Frances Balfour in June 1910.[2] The fifth chapter of her *Women's Suffrage* (1912) concentrated on refuting anti-suffragist arguments and made no attempt to comprehend their mentality; it would be unreasonable to expect anything else from a suffrage leader in mid-campaign. Suffragist MPs often predicted that posterity would be astonished to know that their movement had ever been opposed, and in parliamentary debates after the partial enfranchisement of British women in 1918 it became commonplace to dismiss the 'amusing, if not grotesque' anti-suffragist arguments.[3] By the 1920s laughter and ridicule, which were at first the allies of the anti-suffragist, had changed sides.

'The Antis', as the suffragists contemptuously called them, suffered the threefold penalty – intellectual, moral and political – incurred by those who back the wrong horse in politics. Their arguments were seen as foolish and often mutually contradictory. Their motives were seen by suffragists at the time – let alone later – as a strange compound of prejudice and self-interest: 'it is worse than useless to reason with moral corruption,' the suffragist Maude Royden pronounced. The anti-suffragist Hensley Henson in 1913 ruefully drew a parallel between suffragists and anti-vivisectionists: both inflamed controversy by imputing low motives to their opponents. Sylvia Pankhurst, angered in 1954 by the successful subsequent public career of the anti-suffragist Violet Markham, spoke of 'that foul traitor – who, while the suffragettes were hunger striking, appeared on the Albert Hall platform, surrounded by reactionaries like Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon, protesting against women having the vote.'[4] The penalty was for the Antis to be ridiculed as misguided and unimportant, consigned to history's rubbish-heap. The Antis even lost confidence in themselves, or at least found activities more profitable than brooding over a past which some might regard as