



DOUBLE TAKE

Two sides One story

Henry Asquith & Sylvia Pankhurst fought over...

VOTES FOR WOMEN

BELINDA HOLLYER

CHOLASTIC

DOUBLE TAKE

Two sides One story

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藏书章

**VOTES^{FOR}
WOMEN**

**Dedicated to the memory of the suffragettes
whose story is told in this book.**

This story is based, as much as possible, on primary source material - the words and pictures of the people that witnessed the events described. Whilst it is not possible to know the exact thoughts, feelings and motives of all the people involved, the book aims to give an insight into the experience of the events, based on the available evidence.

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Prologue

THE WOMAN IS ALONE in her cell, late at night. It is cold in the cell and the air is clammy and damp. It smells of misery – of despair and the loss of hope, of unwashed bodies and spilled urine and worse. The only light is a faint beam through a slot in the door.

The woman is very frightened. She's a fighter; there's no question of her giving up. She knows her protest is right. She will never give up; she would rather die. But she is frightened of what will happen to her next.

She is sick – sick with desperate hunger and thirst, for she has been on a hunger strike for days. She is utterly exhausted, for she has been pacing her cell for 22 hours without pausing. The warders come to peer through the slot in her door, and go away to whisper to each other in disbelief: can she *really* still be on her feet? But she is – just. She knows she may faint again; that she will

be at the mercy of the doctors again; that they may not let her out again before she collapses. She is worried about her friends, many of whom are also in prison – also sick, also close to collapse.

But she does not – cannot – *will not* – give up.



The man is alone in his study, late at night. He sits at his desk writing, and a pool of light falls on the piles of papers in front of him. He is catching up on his work while the house is quiet. His beloved children are safe in bed; his fascinating and distracting wife is out at a party.

The man is writing letters to friends, notes for speeches, answers to questions, summaries of arguments. He also makes time to write in his diary, where he records the day's events and the things that matter to him – how other politicians are behaving, how he is trying to get his policies accepted, how he can convince voters to support his party.

He knows about the woman in prison, and about many other women in prisons all around the country. After all, it is his laws that have put them there – he is the Prime Minister. But he seldom mentions the women in his diary. He believes they are hysterical and misguided fools; that what they are asking for is senseless and impossible. He thinks that they have brought their punishments on themselves. If they would only promise to give up their irrational fight, he would arrange for them all to be released.

In the meantime, he ignores their protests as best he can. He has no intention of giving in.

Introduction

IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY Britain, almost everyone over the age of 18 has the right to vote in both local and national elections. Only a few adults (such as those in prison) are excluded. In fact, voting is something most people in Britain take for granted. A hundred years ago, however, it was a very different story. In 1900 in Britain, less than one third of all adults were allowed to vote. Decisions made by local councils and in the national parliament at Westminster affected everyone's lives, but most people in the country couldn't do anything to influence those decisions. If they didn't like any of Britain's laws or didn't agree with the men elected to the local council or to the national parliament, they couldn't vote to change them. Only a few people could.

In 1900 the right to vote was restricted in two ways: by your ownership of property, and by your sex. If you were

an adult man who owned or occupied property of a certain value, you could register to vote. That meant about 30 per cent of adult men couldn't vote, because they weren't rich enough or didn't live in the right places. But if you were an adult woman you couldn't vote at all, no matter how much property you owned or where you lived. No woman was allowed to register, or to vote, in national elections, and no woman could stand for election as a local council or parliamentary candidate, either.

But British women had not always been excluded from voting. In the Middle Ages, hundreds of years earlier, some women had been accepted as voters. Others had even voted in local elections in the early 1800s – at that time, about 500,000 women were on local electoral registers. Those women had to own a certain amount of property, as did the men who voted at that time.

During the 1800s, however, three important reform laws were passed by the national parliament. These new laws, passed in 1832, 1867 and 1884, in some ways made British elections fairer than they had been. They gave thousands more middle-class and working-class men – and even some agricultural labourers – the right to vote.

But these reform laws specifically excluded all women from voting. That hadn't happened before. The wording of the new laws said that only "*male persons*" could vote in national elections in Britain. After that, when women tried to register or vote in any local elections most of them were rejected because of those "*male persons*" words, even though the words were only supposed to

apply to parliamentary elections. So as far as the right to vote was concerned, women were worse off after 1867 than they had been in the Middle Ages!

By 1900, though, ideas about British society were slowly beginning to change. Some people believed that women should be able to vote, but the idea of equal rights for women was a new and challenging one. The rules about how people should behave were still very strict, and covered almost every aspect of life.

It is probably hard for us to imagine what this was like. Our twenty-first century society is much more relaxed, and we accept differences and alternatives much more easily. People now generally agree that everyone should be treated equally, no matter what their colour or sex or ethnic origin. But in Britain in 1900 most people would have thought that idea crazy and dangerous. They probably would have believed that it offended against both God's laws and natural laws; even against common sense.



This is the story of Sylvia Pankhurst – one woman who took a stand on women's rights, and whose courage and determination helped to win the vote for every adult woman in Britain. It is also the story of Henry Asquith – a man who opposed votes for women and fought hard against it, but who, in the end, had to admit defeat.

Asquith
The Sledgehammer
1852 – 1905



HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH was the son of Joseph and Emily Asquith, and was born in Morley on 12 September 1852. When Herbert Asquith was young his brother and sisters called him Bertie, and later on his second wife Margot and the rest of his family called him Henry. But by the time he was a leading Liberal Party politician, and for many years the Prime Minister of Great Britain, most people just called him Asquith. That is the name we use for him in this book.

Joseph Asquith was a Yorkshire woollen merchant – Joseph's own father had owned a cloth mill – and although he was not especially well off he provided a comfortable living for his family. But his sudden death in 1860 left his wife, Emily, and their four young children – William, Herbert Henry, Evelyn and Lilian – in financial difficulties. At first, Emily Asquith's father helped out by

sending the two boys to boarding school. Later, when Emily's father also died, her brothers took over responsibility for the Asquith family. Emily Asquith and her two daughters moved to St Leonard's in Sussex, while the two boys were sent off to live with an uncle in London, and to school in the City of London.

It wasn't uncommon then for boys to be sent away to boarding school at an early age, and to spend very little time at home with their families, but Asquith's experience was exceptional. He was effectively orphaned at a very young age and raised by uncles, aunts and schoolmasters, and so he didn't have much of a childhood. His young life must have been sad and difficult for a while because of his father's death and the early separation from his mother. We don't know how Asquith felt about that; but we do know that he struggled with bouts of anxiety and depression throughout his life, so perhaps those early losses affected him profoundly.

Asquith was a clever young man who did very well at school and university. But many of his contemporaries at Oxford University thought he behaved in a superior and cold way – characteristics that masked his shyness. However, despite that shyness, Asquith most certainly had a plan for his life and a set of goals mapped out with care and deliberate calculation. He may have been reserved but he was also a brilliant debater – his style was described as “*cool and courageous and intellectually alert*” and he showed a striking command of language

when he spoke in public. In 1874 he became President of the Oxford Union – the University's famous debating society. Even at that early stage, people noticed that he did not try to reconcile his opponents to his point of view – instead, he plunged straight into any argument with no holds barred. No wonder he earned the nickname of "*The Sledgehammer*"!



Asquith wanted a career that made use of his debating skills. The law seemed a good choice and he trained as a lawyer and joined a legal firm in London, but he was not very successful at attracting rich clients. He needed to find a better career, especially because at that time he had a wife and a young family to support.

Asquith decided to enter politics. At that time there were two main political parties in Britain: the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. Traditionally, Conservative support came from aristocratic land-owning families, while the Liberals attracted rising middle-class professionals. Both parties had achieved important reforms during the nineteenth century, but by the 1880s only the Liberal Party still put parliamentary and economic reforms at the heart of its policies. Asquith's background, education and beliefs made the Liberal Party his natural political home.

In 1886 he stood for election as a Liberal Party candidate for East Fife, in Scotland, and was elected to parliament.

Asquith threw himself enthusiastically into parliamentary life and worked hard to establish himself. He was good-looking, charming and ambitious, and success soon began to come his way. In 1892 the Prime Minister of the day, William Gladstone, gave Asquith the important position of Home Secretary in his new government – so he had already made his mark as an impressive young politician. As Home Secretary, Asquith was responsible for the internal affairs of the country, which included managing the country's security and the police.

Asquith's wife, Helen, died suddenly of typhoid fever in 1891. Asquith had loved her deeply, but when she died he was already in love with another woman as well – the lively and remarkable Margot Tennant. Asquith was determined to marry her, and after three years of his single-minded courtship, Margot finally agreed. They married on 10 May 1894.

Soon after he became Gladstone's Home Secretary, Asquith spoke publicly on the subject that was to make him the declared enemy of thousands of women in Britain: his opposition to women's suffrage. But the Liberal Party lost political power in 1895, and became the opposition instead. Now the Conservative Party was the government.

Asquith didn't enjoy being in opposition. Although he liked political argument he preferred debates to have a practical purpose, he didn't want to argue just for the sake of it. But it was ten years before the Liberal Party

won another election, so Asquith had to get used to life away from the focus of political power. He spent a lot of that time travelling the country helping to keep up Liberal Party spirits by making speeches to local associations. In fact, he spent so much time away from parliament that other politicians made jokes about his absence! In the days before television and radio, political meetings in local constituencies were much more important than they are now. Asquith was a popular speaker and when he was advertised, there was always a good turnout to hear him. He became quite famous.

By the summer of 1905 a general election was not far away. Now the Liberal Party was triumphantly riding a wave of popularity, while the Conservatives had lost most of their popular support. Everyone thought that the man who had achieved that turnabout for the Liberals was Asquith. The leader of the Liberal Party was Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and if the Liberals did gain power then he would become Prime Minister. But Asquith was the deputy leader, and he was aiming high.

Pankhurst
A Plain Little Woman
1882 – 1905



SYLVIA PANKHURST GREW UP amidst the turmoil of political campaigns and crusades that included all the radical issues of the day. She was the second daughter of Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst, and was born in Old Trafford, in Manchester, on 5 May 1882. Her father, Richard, was a lawyer and a radical thinker who actively supported women's rights, and helped form the Manchester Society for Women's Rights in 1866.

Richard Pankhurst also stood for parliament as a candidate for a new party: the Independent Labour Party. This was formed by a group of trade unionists in 1893, and later developed into the Labour Party. Its key founder and leader was a Scottish trade union leader called James Keir Hardie. Richard Pankhurst was not elected, but he and Keir Hardie remained close colleagues and friends.

As a young girl, Sylvia often accompanied her father when he was campaigning for the Independent Labour Party. As she watched him standing on a soapbox or a chair and arguing the cause of ordinary people with passionate earnestness, Sylvia was moved both to great admiration for her father, and deep compassion for working people. In her mind she compared “*those endless rows of smoke-begrimed little houses with never a tree or a flower in sight*” with her own comfortable home and its two May trees in a big garden.

*I would ask myself if it could be just that I should live
in Victoria Park and go well fed and warmly clad,
whilst the children of those grey slums were lacking the
very necessities of life.*

When Richard Pankhurst died suddenly in 1898 his wife and their three young daughters – Christabel, Sylvia and Adela – wanted to carry on the public service and community spirit he had developed, and which his family shared and supported. One of the principles he taught his daughters was this: “*If you do not work for others, you will not have been worth the upbringing.*” Christabel – and Sylvia in particular – took this to heart. Many years later Sylvia’s son said of his mother that everything she undertook she entered into with total commitment, without counting the cost to herself.

