

THE  
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE  
TO



THE  
SUFFRAGETTES

“What fantastic guides these are – I wish I’d had them  
when I was eighteen.”

EMMA THOMPSON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW  
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Zoë Thomas*

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# Introduction

The campaign for female political suffrage which erupted in the years leading up to World War One was the most significant expression of feminist activism in British history. Public fascination with the activities of the suffrage campaigners was fuelled by an outpouring of suffrage autobiographies in the 1920s and 1930s, and, since then, has been kept alive by plentiful books, exhibitions, and most recently the first film, *Suffragette*, released in 2015. Primary sources relating to suffrage are treasured in both national and private archives: they range from photographs and hand-stitched banners through to suffrage-branded dolls, teapots, and board games.

Portrayals of the suffrage movement have been numerous and varied. Many supporters published memoirs to justify their activities. These tended to be romanticised accounts that celebrated individual heroines, rather than comprehensive histories, and they often contradicted one another. Three of the most famous suffragettes, Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, were all leading figures in the militant campaigns and all wrote memoirs that deviated substantially from one another.

Sylvia Pankhurst's 1931 account portrayed her mother negatively, arguing that the activities of working class socialist women – and Sylvia's own role – were what led to the breakthrough in 1918,

when the franchise was expanded to include some (though by no means all) women. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, on the other hand, argued that it was the commitment of the militant suffragettes that led to women getting the vote.

As this illustrates, the central disagreement revealed by these memoirs, and by numerous other historical documents, is whether militancy or peaceful activism was the better tactic to use. Suffrage campaigners also disagreed over whether their goal should be securing *all* women the vote, or only those of the middle and upper classes. They disagreed, too, over how much emphasis should be put on changing society in ways which would benefit women as opposed to concentrating entirely on winning them the vote.

The conflicting views of those who were actually involved with the female suffrage campaigns have been echoed down the years in the variety of interpretations put forward by historians. To give a flavour of them this guide looks at three key areas of debate. First, the breadth of the suffrage movement's ambitions. Elizabeth Crawford and Martin Pugh, for example, see the women's suffrage movement as essentially a single-issue political campaign devoted to securing women the vote. Others, such as June Purvis, argue that suffrage campaigners aimed to bring about equality and social change for women on a far broader basis.

The second big issue historians have debated is whether it was the work of the suffrage campaigners

or the participation of women during World War One which ultimately led to women getting the vote. The third debate is over the relative effectiveness of the activities of the different groups of suffrage campaigners. Representing these, the two most famous societies were the law-abiding, non-violent National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), and the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The groups disagreed on both the basis of their claims for political power and on the tactics they used to bring about change and historians continue to argue over which one did the most to extend the franchise to women.

## When did the suffrage campaigns begin?

The campaign for women's political rights goes back further than most people realise, to the late 18th century. In the early days its advocates were few, but from small beginnings a sense of injustice intensified across the century, and by the 1860s campaigning organisations were blooming among both the middle and the working classes. These were based all over the country, using major cities such as Manchester for public meetings and in which to organise petitions. They had different names and different configurations, but they were united in their main aim: to win women the right to

vote through peaceful, constitutional methods.

In 1866 The Women's Suffrage Committee, founded by artist and activist Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891), collected 1,500 signatories for a petition requesting precisely this. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the highly respected political economist, philosopher and Liberal Party MP, presented the petition to the House of Commons in 1867. At the same time, he proposed an amendment to the Second Reform Act (1867), arguing that instead of just male householders getting the vote, *all* householders in Britain should be enfranchised, regardless of their sex.

The bill was unsuccessful, but from 1870 to 1884 bills in favour of women's suffrage were presented to Parliament on an almost annual basis. Women campaigners worked hard to keep the issue in the public eye by holding regular public meetings and publishing pamphlets, leaflets and journals. They concentrated particularly on Parliamentary proceedings because these were extensively covered in the regional and national press.

In 1869, John Stuart Mill laid out his argument for "perfect equality" between the sexes in his essay *The Subjection of Women*. He wrote that the subordination of women was "one of the chief hindrances to human improvement" and should be ended on the grounds of social justice. His liberal feminist position represented the views of many suffragist campaigners and his essay remained very popular for the next 50 years.

There were, however, suffrage groups with different preoccupations. Socialist feminists, in particular, devoted much of their energy to attacking the economic inequality resulting from the British class system. They considered it crucial to take into account class as well as gender in debates about female political emancipation. As historian Sue Bruley notes: "Socialist-feminists... believed that ultimately women could only be emancipated in a socialist society." In contrast to this, liberal feminists were often perceived to be concerned only with the rights and needs of middle-class women.

Just as they do today, feminists in the 19th and early 20th centuries had very different ideas about equality and women's rights. Women's consciousness of their gender co-existed in different ways with their sense of class identity and political party loyalty and they had a wide range of ideas about the appropriate social roles for men and women. The Women's Franchise League, a female suffrage society set up in 1889, was seen as radical because it included married women in its demand for the vote. Other more cautious suffragettes supported married women's exclusion. Similarly, many campaigners did not want gender differences to be extinguished. Instead they argued that female enfranchisement was needed so that women could perform their gendered role more effectively, using their nurturing and womanly nature to help bring about social reforms. Others still assumed a basic

human equality between men and women. “Feminist ideology took different forms,” Sue Bruley writes, “and there was not one but many feminisms.”

## What was the situation at the turn of the century?

Victorian women had very few civil or political rights. Until the Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1882, married women belonged to their husbands in the eyes of the law. The 1882 act significantly improved their position as it allowed married women to own and control their own property.

By the turn of the century further gains had been made. Government involvement in state life had grown considerably, which meant more officials were needed to run local services. Slowly, women began to gain power within the expanded local organisations, among them the church and those devoted to education and social reform. In 1894 the requirement that **Poor Law Guardians** must own property was removed, enabling married women to stand for this important office.\* Women

\* **Poor Law Guardians** were people elected to sit on the Boards of Guardians that administered the parish workhouses. By 1895 there were 802 female guardians in Britain

who did so included some from the working classes, such as Selina Cooper from Burnley. From 1907 women ratepayers could also stand in borough and county council elections, although few were successful and only around 50 women had become borough or county councillors by 1914.

By the early 20th century, then, it was deemed more or less acceptable for women to have a position in local government services. National politics, on the other hand, was seen differently. Many still believed that national politics was a man’s world, and continued to promote the well-established ideology of “public/private” spheres, arguing that women should be based in the home whilst men should hold public roles in society. Various anti-suffrage arguments were put forward, drawing attention to women’s apparent inferiority to men: their lack of education, fears about women neglecting their home or children, limited experiences of work and a supposed inability to defend their country.

The Conservative statesman Lord Curzon declared in 1912 that women “do not have the experience to be able to vote”. He dwelt on women’s physical weaknesses and warned people that women might not vote for the Conservatives (which, he felt, would have a detrimental effect on government and on society). Taking what was a common line of argument, he used war as a way to highlight how women could not be ranked with men: “What is the good of talking about the equality

of the sexes? The first whiz of the bullet, the first boom of the cannon and where is the equality of the sexes then?"

Despite such strong opposition, suffrage campaigners kept up the pressure. At the turn of the century, writes the historian Harold Smith, "diverse groups of women had concluded that the world would be a better place if they possessed the franchise", regardless of whether they believed they had the "same inherent rights as men or whether they thought that women had unique concerns as wives and mothers". To understand how truly radical this sense of female entitlement to suffrage was, it is important to remember that many working-class men still did not have the vote before 1918 either, because men had to own property to be able to vote.

The franchise was, however, slowly extended in the 19th century to include more men, via the Second Reform Act (1867) and the Third Reform Act (1884). By 1900, on average, two out of three working men could vote. The fact that this figure now included some working-class men heightened a sense of the hypocrisy of the situation. Middle-class women were denied the right to vote but in many ways their circumstances were similar: they were ratepayers and subject to the same laws of the land.

## The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies

In 1897 all of the regional suffrage societies were brought together under the umbrella organisation of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which aimed to have a branch in every constituency in Britain. Officially, the NUWSS pursued a non-party policy, offering help in the elections to any candidate who planned to support women's suffrage. In fact, a number of prominent Liberals dominated its leadership. After the death of one of them – Lydia Becker – in 1890, the president of the society for the next 20 years was tireless campaigner Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929), who had published and lectured extensively on female suffrage.

Members of the NUWSS thought that the best way to achieve political change for women was to target parliament through peaceful persuasion and at the same time to educate the public. They were active in lobbying individual MPs known to be sympathetic to their cause, encouraging them to raise the issue of women's suffrage in debates on the floor of the House. Their aim was to build, through this, an all-party body of support for a **private member women's suffrage bill**.\*

\* A **private member's bill** is a proposed law put forward in Parliament by an MP who is not a member of the Cabinet.

The NUWSS concentrated its efforts on demanding equal voting rights for women under the existing franchise laws, which at this point required electors to be property holders. This tactic went against the views of those in the Labour and Socialist movements, who aimed to achieve suffrage for all adults, regardless of financial income or property ownership. Many NUWSS members did hope for a full democratic franchise eventually, but thought it necessary to establish sexual equality first, before campaigning for voting rights for working-class women.



MILLICENT GARRETT  
FAWCETT

Millicent Garrett Fawcett was brought up in Suffolk in a family where she and her siblings were encouraged to have an active interest in political issues. Her older sister Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917) went to London and became the first female doctor in Britain. Millicent joined her, aged 12, when she was sent to study at a private boarding school in Blackheath. This education gave her a life-

long interest in education and literature. During her teenage years, another sister, Louise, took Millicent to see John Stuart Mill speak in support of women's rights, which profoundly influenced her. She was also introduced to Henry Fawcett (1833-1884), MP for Brighton and a supporter of women's votes. He had been blinded in a shooting accident in 1857 and had been supposed to marry Millicent's older sister Elizabeth. Elizabeth, however, decided that she wanted to devote herself to medicine, Millicent and Henry became close and, although he was 14 years her senior, they married in 1867.

A prolific writer of articles

The NUWSS used leaflets, petitions, letters and rallies as its key tactics to gain votes for women. From 1897 to 1903 it consisted of a federation of 16 societies, but, by 1909, another 45 had been set up under its auspices. In the same year the NUWSS established its own journal, *The Common Cause*, edited by Cambridge-educated pacifist and feminist Helena Swanwick (1864-1939).

The organisation continued to grow fast. By 1911 there were 305 societies, and by 1913, 400. Joyce Marlow presents the popular view that it was the law-abiding strategies of the NUWSS, not the

and books (including *Lectures on Political Subjects* and *Political Economy for Beginners*), Millicent was also involved in the establishment of women's colleges such as Newnham College at the University of Cambridge. She could often be found sitting in the Ladies' Gallery at the House of Commons eagerly watching political debates.

Although a strong advocate for the NUWSS, she campaigned for a wide variety of causes – not just the vote for women. She helped to support Josephine Butler in her campaign to stop white slave trade trafficking, for example, and Clementina Black's efforts to help low-paid women

workers. Although she was a Liberal she became increasingly frustrated with the Liberal Party's lack of support for female franchise. She remained committed to constitutional methods to gain votes, but she admired the courage of the suffragettes.

When all women over 21 finally got the franchise in 1928 Millicent was allowed to attend Parliament to see the vote take place. She wrote that night in her diary: "It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill on May 20th, 1867. So I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning." ■