A history of women's Suffrage. The changing face of the movement.
By Sarah James

Many of the freedoms and rights we enjoy today were won after long struggles and intensive campaigns. The campaign for women's suffrage is one of, if not the most important example for women throughout the world.

In the present day women throughout the UK take for granted their ability to vote – many do not even bother, and have become apathetic towards the difference that their cross in the box can make in politics, but less than 100 years ago women did not have the choice whether to turn up at the polling station on voting days, and throughout the world the fight for suffrage has taken even longer with Saudi Arabian women only able to start to vote in 2015. (Zarya, 2015)[1]

The suffrage movement became one of the most important periods in women's history during the early 20th century. However, to fully understand the fight for the right to vote we not only have to focus on the famous campaign founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903 but we also need to look much earlier in time and at the influences of the early feminist movement.

During the 18th century the world began to change. Women started to express themselves through creative methods such as literary writing and this began to expose the conditions in which the women of the day found themselves in. However, in some circles professional female writers were looked upon as 'vulgar'. One of the earliest works of feminist philosophy was written by Mary Wollstonecroft in 1792. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Wollstonecraft, 1792)[2] was written at the height of the French revolution, at a time when Olympe de Gouges was demanding equal rights for women in the new republic. Many of the views in Wollstonecroft's book were later associated to those of the most extremist suffragettes, although they were in fact more akin to the fundamental beliefs of the women's movement from its earliest times and she is often considered to be the grandmother of British Feminism. (En.wikipedia.org, 2016)[3]

The nineteenth century saw Britain entering a new era. A new Queen was in place and women began to challenge their role in society and when James Mill, the father of the later Member of Parliament John Stuart Mill wrote in 1823 '*that since the interests' women and children were bound with those of husbands or fathers, women could be denied political rights, without inconvenience'* (Bauer and Ritt, 1979)[4], an angry response ensued.

58% of the adult male population could vote at the turn of the century, but many women who had found themselves in similar circumstances to their male counterparts were still being denied the right to vote. At the same time supporters of the socialist Robert Owen believed improving women's position in society was the way forward and the key arguments for suffrage began to emerge in texts repeatedly, including those of Frances Wright who wrote that *women wherever placed, high or low in the scale of cultivation, hold the destinies of mankind* (Wright, 1829)[5]

Although literary publications had been successful in provoking women's attention to the need for suffrage this alone would not have led us to where we are in today's society. The use of submitting petitions to Parliament was a key tactic to demonstrate support for the cause and on 3rd August 1832, the first petition to Parliament asking for votes for women was presented to the House of Commons by Henry Hunt MP on behalf of a Mary Smith. Later that year, the Great Reform Act expanded the body of voters, but to 'male persons' only.

A further petition for women's suffrage which had collected 1500 signatures was presented to the House of Commons by John Stuart Mill in 1866. John who disagreed with his father's views had become a Member of Parliament in 1865 and had campaigned for Parliamentary reform. The petition included an amendment to the Second Reform Act of 1867 calling for women to have the same political rights as men. Despite this the amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73.

Following on from this a mounting feeling of unfairness started to emerge and as of the mid-19th century groups of women joined together to campaign for the vote. Known as suffragists - a name derived from the term suffrage from the Latin: suffragium, meaning "vote", "political support", and the right to vote. Following the defeat in 1867, bills in favour of women and the vote were presented on an almost annual basis to Parliament from 1870 to 1884. This kept interest high and as the parliamentary proceedings were covered in the national and regional press of the time it assisted in mobilising women to join the movement.

Suffragist groups existed all over the country at this point and under many different names but their aim was the same: to achieve the right to vote for women through lawful, nonviolent methods. These groups started to work together in 1897, under the group name NUWSS (Bl.uk, 2016)[6] - The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies to campaign for the vote for women. They began to lobby Parliament with petitions and hold public meetings, calling for the vote to equal that which was to be afforded to men.

The NUWSS was led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett. She wrote widely on women's issues and was a frequent public speaker on women's rights. Born in 1847 and raised in Suffolk, Millicent later said that she had been nurtured as a suffragette right from the cradle.

On the night Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865 she met Henry Fawcett, and it is reported that upon hearing Millicent remark that the murder of Lincoln was a greater loss than that of any crowned head in Europe he immediately fell in love her (Phillips, 2003)[7]. Henry was a Liberal MP, and as such when they married in 1867 Millicent was propelled into the heart of London and she regularly sat in the Ladies' Gallery of the House of Commons to watch the debates.

Her strategic and unwavering leadership of the NUWSS made it a significant and inspirational force in the crusade for women's votes and like Millicent, many of the women were wives or daughters of prominent politicians and shared many of the same beliefs and friendship circles. This lay down the foundations of the optimistic views of the suffragettes.

But by the early twentieth century, many of members of the NUWSS had become impatient with the tactics that were being used and one such woman, Emmeline Pankhurst decided to break away and set up a separate organisation and so on 10th October 1903 in the Pankhurst family home and with the help of her daughters Sylvia and Adela, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was founded. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016)[8]

This for many is the starting block of the suffragette movement and many may not be familiar with what went before but without the commitment and determination of the women before her it would be hard to imagine what part Emmeline Pankhurst would have played in the fight for suffrage, if any.

The Suffragists and the Suffragettes are two very different, and often very divided movements. The term 'suffragists' was the broader label referring to the supporters of suffrage for women, whereas the members of the WSPU became known as the suffragettes (around 1906, after a Daily Mail article devised the phrase). Dora Montefiore noted that the WSPU "revolted against the inertia and conventionalism which seemed to have fastened upon... the NUWSS", (Tinakirsty.wordpress.com, 2016)[9] and without doubt its aims were to exercise more militant, public, and illegal tactics

Women were roused to abandon the tactics of the NUWSS and coordinate to empower all women, married and unmarried alike (as at the time, some groups only sought the vote for single women and widows) and to demand, not ask for, their birth right.

The WSPU gained publicity and were known for their militant tactics, leading some modern historians to question whether their actions were justified or if they were domestic terrorists, (Thompson, 2016)[10] but Mrs Pankhurst believed it would take an active organisation, with young working class women, to draw attention to the cause. The motto 'Deeds not Words' slogan was a forecast of what was to come.

The Pankhurst family name more than any other, is associated with the struggle for women's right to vote. Born in Manchester in 1858, Emmeline (née Goulden) was raised in a household where her parents were politically active and she was introduced to the women's suffrage movement from an early age when she began to attend meetings with her mother. In 1878 Emmeline met Richard Pankhurst, a barrister twenty-four years her senior and they went on to marry the next year. Her eldest daughter Christabel later observed in her memoirs that her 'Mother's career began with her marriage' (Pankhurst, 1959)[11]

Richard, a campaigner for multiple causes, including free speech, had established a National Society for Women's Suffrage, drafted the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill (the first women's suffrage bill in England) and was author of the bill which became the Married Women's Property Act 1882 which gave wives absolute control over their property and earnings (En.wikipedia.org, 2016)[12]

Until his sudden death in July 1898 at the age of sixty-four from stomach ulcers, Richard was fully supportive of Emmeline's efforts as she was to his. Publicly supporting her husband during his campaigns for Parliament in both 1883 when he stood as a candidate for Manchester and again in 1885 for Rotherhithe, Kent. However, his controversial views led these campaigns to be unsuccessful but granted him a place of great respect in the Independent Labour Party.

Emmeline lost heart in public work following Richard's death and grieved heavily. During the years following, she removed herself from all political involvement and it was during this time that Christabel forged a friendship with Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper. This alliance was to inadvertently change the way in which the struggle for suffrage was fought.

At the age of twenty-one Christabel Pankhurst met Eva and Esther and quickly became a regular visitor to their home. The two had met in 1896 in Italy and from the following year began living together at Esther's house in Manchester's Victoria Park. The bond between the three was extremely noticeable not least to Emmeline who complained that Christabel was never home as she was always with Eva and Esther. It has been questioned as to whether their relationship was purely platonic.

Her sister Sylvia recalled that at this time Christabel adored Eva *"and when Eva suffered from neuralgia, as often happened, she would sit with her for hours, massaging her head. To all of us at home, this seemed remarkable indeed, for Christabel had never been willing to act as the nurse to any other human being".* (Irving, 2009)[13]

Not previously interested in education, it was at Eva's encouragement that Christabel enrolled at Manchester University to study Law, where she graduated in 1906 with a first class degree but as a woman she was not allowed to practice.

Following the death of her predecessor Lydia Becker, Esther Roper took over the role of secretary at the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage (MNSWS) in 1893 and she is credited with re-energising the organisation's work and widening the range of the MNSWS votes for women campaign. Under the direction of Esther, the society navigated the focus away from ensuring the interests of middle class women, to actively striving for the involvement of working-class women.

However, this took its toll on her health and by 1896 she was suffering from exhaustion. To recuperate she holidayed in Italy and it is here that she met Eva Gore-Booth. During their time together Esther shared stories with Eva of her work campaigning for trade union organisation amongst women and for women's right to vote and the two women became friends, and life companions.

In 1902, Eva Gore-Booth was campaigning at the Clitheroe by-election on behalf of David Shackleton, a Labour candidate who had assured Eva that he would support women's suffrage. Shackleton was elected but did not complete the promise made to Eva. This directed the founding of the Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and Other Worker's Representation Committee by Eva Gore-Booth, Esther Roper and

Sarah Reddish. The setting up of this committee led to Eva Gore-Booth meeting Christabel Pankhurst.

Christabel was, at the time speaking on behalf of women's suffrage and using Esther Roper's approach that the best way to win the vote was to put pressure on MP's through raising the awareness of the women Lancashire textile workers.

During 1904 Christabel caused controversy in the Women's Trade Union Council as she tried to force the council to make women's suffrage one of its aims to which they refused. This led to the resignation of Eva Gore-Booth from the council and Christabel to distance herself from Eva and Esther, and she began engaging in increasingly unpleasant attacks on the Labour party for its slowness in reinforcing the calls of women. Instead she moved towards the Women's Social Political and Union, the group formed by her mother and sisters on 10th October 1903.

The WSPU was attempting to get the vote on the same par as men, as opposed to full suffrage for women. Ada Nield Chew wrote to The Clarion in 1904, criticising this policy, because "the entire class of wealthy women would be enfranchised, that the great body of working women, married or single, would be voteless still"

The group was seen as another in a long list of Middle Class women until Christabel and Annie Kenney repeatedly shouted 'will the Liberal government give votes to women?' over the top of a speech by Sir Edward Grey, whilst unfolding a banner inscribed "Votes for Women" on 13th October 1905. After being pushed out Christabel got them both arrested by spitting at a policeman.

The pair became the first women to be arrested in the name of suffrage and Christabel used the court appearance to argue that women were being deprived of the means to an orderly protest. The two were fined and Pankhurst's mother pleaded with her daughter to allow her to pay the fine and take them home. Christabel argued against this and told her mother that if the fine were paid she would never return home. (Purvis, 2002)[14] Having refused to pay or have paid their fines, Christabel and Annie spent a week in Strangeways prison.

Upon their release the campaign for women's suffrage was changed forever. Nearly a thousand people attended meetings protesting against the treatment given to the two, the press was full of sympathy and the cause had found its best recruitment tool – Martyrdom.

It wasn't long before this tactic was being used more widely, using the courts as a stage and enduring prison to publicise the campaign. The WSPU began heckling political meetings where anti-suffragist Cabinet members would be in attendance, Herbert Asquith, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer was vocal in his stance and was a prime target. In June 1906 Teresa Billington was arrested after a fracas with police during a protest outside of Asquith's home in Cavendish Square.

Teresa refused to speak in court stating that since women were not represented in making laws the court had no jurisdiction over her. (Billington-Greig, McPhee and FitzGerald, n.d.)[15] She became the first suffragette to be imprisoned in Holloway, however her sentence was cut short when an anonymous donor paid her fine via the Daily Mirror. Two days after Billington's sentencing Adela Pankhurst and Hannah Mitchell were jailed for refusing to pay fines for obstruction following arrests at a meeting in Manchester attended by MP's.

During 1906 an event occurred which marked a change in the movement. On 25th October Members of the WSPU gained access to the central lobby of the House of Commons and by bearing flags, standing on seats and making speeches they interrupted the State opening of Parliament. Ten women were arrested that day for breach of the peace and chose to go to prison rather than pay fines. However, these were not women expected to be militant in their protests but were of title or social position. Included in this group were Anne Cobden Sanderson, the daughter of the Politician Richard Cobden and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence a business woman in her own right – the founder of Maison Espérance, a dressmaking cooperative who was also the treasurer of the WSPU.

The imprisonment of such prominent and distinguished woman sparked outrage and the Times printed many letters of protest. One such letter in response to the imprisonment of Anne Cobden Sanderson read *'You have taken and are treating as a felon a daughter of the great Cobden. The man who gave you the cheap loaf'*.

Mrs Pethick-Lawrence on the brink of a nervous breakdown due to her confinement, agreed to keep the peace for six months and was released from Holloway prison on 28th October. Following her release, she spent time in Italy recuperating and during this time her husband took over the role of treasurer of the WSPU and was the only man in the history of the WSPU to hold a high position.

The controversy and publicity surrounding these events brought huge donations to the cause and the effectiveness of the increasing public meeting and protests were inspiring those once against the tactics of the WSPU. On 7th February 1907, the NUWSS held its first procession and 3000 women marched from Hyde Park Corner to the Exeter Hall and less that one week later 13th February a further march organised by the WSPU in response to the Kings speech the day before took place. It was here that Mrs Pankhurst's cry of 'Rise Up Women!' was shouted, in response over 400 women cried out 'Now' and singing proceeded to march to Westminster.

Tune: John Brown's Body
Rise up, women, for the fight is hard and long;
Rise up in thousands singing loud a battle song.
Right is might, and in strength we shall be strong
And the cause goes marching on
Glory, glory, hallelujah! Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah! The cause goes marching on.
By Theodora Mills

By the time the first group got to the green at Westminster Abbey the Police had congregated and were steadfast on dispelling the growing numbers. Although they found that this only strengthened the resolve of the suffragettes who returned to the fray time and again. In all 58 women were arrested, but 15 of the group managed to reach the lobby of the Houses of Parliament. The disturbance lasted for hours, only ending after 10pm. Of the women arrested most were imprisoned at Holloway for two to three weeks including Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst.

Although their numbers were growing and support was increasing politically, the suffragettes were not getting anywhere and there seemed not let up of the approach when Christabel received a letter from the Conservative leader – Arthur Balfour stating that he did not believe that most women wanted the vote, this despite the WSPU claiming that between 1907 and 1908 they held more than five thousand meetings.

In 1907 relations with the Labour Party were cut after differing views regarding suffrage. The Labour Party rejected anything but full adult suffrage at their conference and believed that the slogan 'Votes for Women' was a false cry as working class women would still be without the vote. But this was not to be the only tie that was severed.

There were many branches of the WSPU, especially those in the north that remained close to the Labour Party, during this time some members began to question the leadership of the Pankhurst's. They were making decisions without consulting members and only the views of the wealthier members were seen to be taken on board. Teresa Billington-Greig (She had married in early 1907) wrote and proposed a constitution which would if implemented, weakened the hold the Pankhurst's had over the WSPU and created an internal democracy. This was seen as a huge personal attack, Christabel was reported to have reacted emotionally but Emmeline responded in a more militant way. She tore up the proposed constitution, cancelled the WSPU conference and formed a new committee. She promptly issued a letter, stating that the group was an army and she was the permanent commander in chief. The letter also noted that no one was obliged to remain part of this army. (Permanentrevolution.net, 2017)[16] Seventy six members of the WSPU including Teresa took Emmeline at her word, left the WSPU and formed the Women's Freedom League (WFL)

Teresa wrote in her book The Militant Suffrage movement: emancipation in a hurry, that the WSPU had become socially exclusive and suppressed free speech (Billington-Greig, 1911)[17] In contrast, her vision of the WFL was that of a movement for women's freedom. During their first conference Teresa told the WFL *'Our cause is not only for the vote, but the binding together of all womanhood'* taking on the core values of the early feminists and she later encouraged support for the Cradley Heath Chainmakers pay strike of 1910 because women were 'symbolically breaking the chains forged round her own consciousness' (Phillips, 2014)[18] However, she did not support adult suffrage and stated the only way to achieve true sex equality was for women to have the vote therefore becoming equal to men, whereas adult suffrage would unite opposing views. One such view was quoted on many occasions by the

Liberal MP Herbert Asquith, and in October 1907 he said that Women's suffrage would do more harm than good.

Before he became Prime Mister in 1908, Asquith commented that he would change his view if it could be proven that women did want the vote. This was an enticing call for the movement and 'Women's Sunday' was arranged for 21st June 1908. Brining women together for all parts of the United Kingdom to march in seven different processions. The highly choreographed demonstration attracted crowds of between 300,000 and 500,000. Activists dresses in the suffragette colours white, purple and green carried over 700 banners marched through central London to Hyde Park to hear speakers from all factions of the movement.
Upon taking her place on the stage Emmeline Pankhurst recalled seeing the crowds *When I mounted my platform in Hyde Park, and surveyed the mighty throngs that waited there and the endless crowds that were still pouring into the park from all directions, I was filled with amazement not unmixed with awe. Never had I imagined that so many people could be gathered together to share in a political demonstration* (Pankhurst, 1970)[19]

Yet Asquith ignored the demonstration and this led to the start of more violent acts of militancy. It is from this point that the question arose as to whether the suffragettes were domestic terrorists. Stones were thrown through the windows of 10 Downing Street and through the following years this manner of protest would become common place.

The WSPU had realised that images of suffragettes being arrested and beaten back by Police enraged the public and brought sympathy to the cause and led to more women taking up more extreme acts to be caught in the media and bring attention to the cause. On 29th June 1909 108 men and women were arrested following a protest at Parliament where windows at the Treasury, Home Office and Privy Council were smashed and in the following month the WFL began a 15 week picket outside Parliament demanding to speak with Asquith. When he refused, the group defaced the ballot papers of the Bermondsey by-election. In the midst of these events one woman was arrested for militancy and her actions brought about the most talked about deeds of the suffrage movement.

On 24th June Miss Marion Wallace Dunlop, a well known artist and supporter of the cause was arrested for stencilling a passage from the Bill of Rights on a wall in St. Stephens Hall in the House of Commons. Written in permanent ink it read, "It is the right of the subject to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal." Marion wrote to the Governor of Holloway Prison and demanded that she be given the status of a political prisoner and until such time would eat no food until this right was given. On the fourth day of her strike she was released as there were fears that she would die.
This tactic would be used by many of the suffragettes over the following six years and from September 1909 the authorities began to use force feeding. Described by one Suffragette Mary Leigh following her imprisonment at HMP Winson Green, Birmingham the treatment used by officers and Doctors – *"The wardresses forced me onto a bed (in the cell) and two doctors came in with them. While I was held down a nasal tube was inserted. It was two yards long, with a funnel at the end;*

there was a glass junction in the middle to see if the liquid was passing. The end was put up left and right nostrils on alternate days. Great pain was experienced during the process, both mental and physical." (New Histories, 2017) [20]

By 1910 Asquith's cabinet were split over women's suffrage and by November he dissolved Parliament and announced that no more time would be given to a Bill which would give the vote to some women. on Friday 18th the day after this was said a mass protest took place in Parliament Square and again the suffragettes were faced with violence from the Police. Taking place over a six hour period some of the attacks were sexual and a total of 115 women were arrested but more shockingly maybe, was that three women died from their injuries, it was such a terrible turn of events that it was labelled 'Black Friday'

Between 1910 and 1912 three conciliation bills were put forward, extending the vote to certain women – those owning property. Each time, the bill was defeated. Would the movement have ceased if it had been passed? It would appear from writings that Christabel may have been in favour of ceasing the cause as she supported a system that would give the vote only to women with money and property, a view which caused a rift between Christabel and her sister Sylvia and led to the younger leaving the WSPU.

On 28th July 1914 the world changed forever and so did the suffrage movement. The Great War started and as an act of patriotism Emmeline on 13th August, declared a suspension of the cause. She wrote in her autobiography – My Own Life "*So ends, for the present, the war of women against men*" Women took on the jobs of men whilst they were at war, and by 1916 even Asquith had turned his back on his own views. On 7th May 1916 he wrote to Mrs Fawcett of the NUWSS to advise that he recognised the effort that women had been playing in the war effort and in due cause would reconsider women's franchise. He kept to his word and on 14th August 1916 he raised in the House of Commons that the House would agree to women having a special claim to be heard on questions relating to matters directly affecting them. Without doubt the war effort played a big part in moving the call for women's suffrage forward. It would however be a further two years before women would be allowed to vote at the ballot box.

The Representation of the People Act was given Royal Assent on 6th February 1918 after being passed in the House of Commons (385 for to 55 against) The Act gave women of property over the age of 30 the right to vote – not all women, therefore, could vote – but it was a major start. Millicent Fawcett observed witnessing the legislation coming into force was the greatest moment of her life.

It would be a full 10 years before women finally had the right to vote on an equal stand as men. However, what it did do was enfranchise 8.4 million women to have a say in everyday politics and from November 1918 a further Act was passed, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 allowed women over the age of 21 to stand for election as an MP.

Emmeline Pankhurst saw this as a way of embedding herself and Christabel into British Politics and encouraged her daughter to stand for Parliament through the Women's Party. Christabel stood for but lost the election in Smethwick by 775 votes

as she was seen to have no appeal – a long way from the regard she was once held in. Facing pressure from her mother she was also chosen as the Prospective Parliamentary candidate to contest the seat of Westminster, but the Party wound up three years before an election in 1921.

By the time the Equal Franchise Act was passed in 1928 several Laws had been passed, including the Sex Disqualification Removal Act which made it illegal to exclude women from jobs because of their sex. Women could now become solicitors, barristers and magistrates. Many opportunities had been opened to women, thus rendering the suffragette movement almost null and void.

So, what of the Pankhurst's? Christabel left England in 1921 and settled in the United States where she became a prominent evangelist. On 13th February 1958 at the age of 77, she passed away. Emmeline had moved to Canada in 1922 and after living there for many years she returned to England in 1925, quoting she had grown tired of the winters. She passed away at the age of 69 on 14th June 1928.

After spending most of her life and that of her children campaigning for women's suffrage it is poignant that Emmeline was to pass away two weeks prior to the Equal Franchise Act being passed and so never got to see her work come to fruition in full.

The legacy of the Pankhurst family and especially that of Emmeline remains etched in history forever and women everywhere should be thankful for the vital part they played in the cause for suffrage. Whether their actions can be justified is an individual perception. But without these it would be very hard to determine if women throughout the world would have the opportunities available to them today.

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