

# WHY MANCHESTER? WHY THE PANKHURSTS? WHY 1903? REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENARY OF THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

Karen Hunt

There are many versions of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to be found in the memoirs of participants and in the work of historians. All the Pankhursts produced their own accounts of the fight for women's enfranchisement, the contribution of the WSPU to that struggle and, of course, their own vital role as individuals to the final achievement of the vote.<sup>i</sup> Other suffragettes who at some time or another were in the WSPU also wrote autobiographies, such as Hannah Mitchell's *The Hard Way Up*, Dora Montefiore's *From a Victorian to a Modern*, Mary Gawthorpe's *Up Hill to Holloway*, Constance Lytton's *Prisons and Prisoners*, Annie Kenney's *Memories of a Militant*, or left accounts in their personal papers, such as Teresa Billington Greig.<sup>ii</sup> These accounts, memories, views and reassessments show how innovative, empowering and overwhelming the WSPU could be but they also underline how contentious the organisation was in its various phases - prior to militancy, early militancy, suspension of activities during the Conciliation Bills, the intensification of militancy, the effect of hunger-striking, force-feeding and the Cat and Mouse Act, and so on. There were therefore many readings of the WSPU in its lifetime from within the Union, from those who became dissidents, from those suffragists outside the Union, and of course from those indifferent to or opposed to the women's cause.

Historians and writers continue to relive the battles between different parts of the suffrage movement (militant versus constitutionalist, suffragette versus radical suffragist, adult suffragist versus limited woman suffragist, supporters of Sylvia Pankhurst versus supporters of Christabel Pankhurst and further endless permutations). Some of this gets remarkably personal and proves that suffrage history, and particularly of the WSPU, remains as contentious as ever. There are many examples of this: Sylvia's son and daughter-in-law leading the attacks on Patricia Romero's biography of his mother or, more recently, Martin Pugh and June Purvis quarrelling over the Pankhurst family in the pages of the press as they published their separate biographies.<sup>iii</sup> Too often the clash of interpretations of the past is represented as 'bad history'. We are in the curious position that stereotypes of the suffrage debate, the various suffrage organisations, and individual suffragists and suffragettes are everywhere in the press, in popular history and in public history. It is always easier to tell a story with a single simple narrative, so the fight for the vote was a middle-class affair or suffragism was anti-men and no men took part in the fight for the suffrage or socialist politics and suffrage militancy were incompatible. Yet the story of the fight for women's suffrage is infinitely richer, diverse and complex than such stereotypes allow. This is all the more ironic

when suffrage scholarship itself has been reinvigorated in the last decade. It is both exciting and thoughtful and has raised many issues which have resonances for history more generally. These include the political relationship between the local and the national; the processes by which an individual's politics develop over a lifetime; the interrelationship between a political philosophy, such as liberalism or socialism, and the competing demands of the struggle for women's emancipation; the evolution of street politics and the place of political violence within it. There is no 'last word' on the history of the women's suffrage movement and none seems to be in sight. As the leading suffrage historian Sandra Holton has said '[t]here are ample seams of evidence yet to be mined, many questions yet to be answered, and any number of new stories to be told - the kaleidoscope keeps on turning.'<sup>iv</sup>

At the time and ever since, the suffragettes in particular have fascinated and have provoked partisan responses from contemporaries, commentators, historians and writers. We continue to be mesmerised by the extraordinary family drama of the Pankhursts and the questions of whether it was militancy which won women the vote or how the logic of the escalation of militancy would have evolved but for the intervention of the First World War. The part of the story which is usually passed over rapidly is the formation of the WSPU and its earliest years. The centenary of the formation of the WSPU on 10 October 2003 gave us the opportunity to reflect on the beginnings of this contentious organisation and what that tells us about the ways in which the suffragettes have been represented. I am not going to suggest a determinist explanation for the founding of the WSPU, that somehow the bringing together of this particular social and political setting with these individuals at this time was bound to produce a new kind of women's suffrage organisation. Yet just as there are many ways to narrate the story of women's struggle for enfranchisement so we need to understand something of the possibilities, the times and places as well as the people who helped to start what eventually became a new phase in the fight for votes for women.

So, first of all, what happened on 10 October 1903 at 62 Nelson Street, Chorlton-on-Medlock, Manchester? At short notice, Emmeline Pankhurst hosted a small gathering of local Independent Labour Party (ILP) women at her home. Of her elder daughters, Christabel was not present and Sylvia may also not have been there. Present were Mrs Scott, Mrs Harker, Mrs Hall - all had ILP husbands (John Harker was active on the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, Leonard Hall was a well



Emmeline Pankhurst, 1906

known ILP propagandist and Mr Scott was a well-off supporter of the ILP who was to pay for the rent of the WSPU's first Manchester premises). All the women were active in the ILP, particularly Helen Harker who in the months since the formation of the Manchester Central branch of the ILP in August 1902 had been much the most active woman on the committee.<sup>v</sup>



Christabel Pankhurst, 1906

What was the purpose of the meeting? Rachel Scott, the first Honorary Secretary of the WSPU wrote to the socialist newspaper *Clarion* later that month announcing the new organisation, 'its object being to secure for women complete equality with men, both social and political'. This was seen as a Labour initiative. Scott continued,

*As in the other political parties, so in the Labour Party, the help of women is welcomed in the work of elections; but when leaders and men members of the party are asked for efforts to be made to secure the enfranchisement of women, they express, at the best, vague sympathy. Every reform is considered more vital and more urgent than the removal of the unjust disability put on women.*<sup>vi</sup>

As already noted, there are various competing versions of suffrage history produced by the members of the Pankhurst family. In Sylvia's 1908 version of the formation of the WSPU she emphasised that it was 'a separate women's organisation' which decided from the first to be independent of party, welcoming all shades of political opinion.<sup>vii</sup> This might have been what the WSPU was to become but it was not what it was in its earliest days. In October 1903, Rachel Scott appealed to 'all women socialists' to join in the movement.<sup>viii</sup> What newspaper coverage there was of the new WSPU was in the socialist press (*Clarion* and *Labour Leader*) and the most immediate effect of the group's existence was the increased presence and activism of women *within* the Manchester Central ILP. Suddenly there were resolutions being drafted in the branch's name on women's suffrage which were regularly carried without dissent. By the time Sylvia's influential *The Suffragette Movement* was published in 1931, the WSPU's initial purpose was recorded as being to conduct social as well as political work (e.g., maternity benefit for members of the WSPU); that the organisation should consist mainly of working women; and be 'politically a women's parallel to the ILP, though with primary emphasis on the vote'.<sup>ix</sup> Yet at the time (November 1903), the women's column of the *Clarion* saw the WSPU as an initiative of some Manchester ILP women who had formed a committee for the promotion of women's suffrage.<sup>x</sup> Although the Pankhurst name would have been familiar to *Clarion* readers, none of their names were mentioned and none of the family were officers in the fledgling group. In the radical paper, *New Age*, the recently formed WSPU was described without reference to the Pankhursts:

*All women who feel keenly their unprotected position in the political arena, where men are grasping for the power to dictate the prices women shall pay in the future for food and necessaries of life, should join this Union, and strengthen the hands of those who are uniting to demand the sweeping away of sex injustice.*<sup>xi</sup>

By January 1904 the Pankhurst name was linked to the WSPU in the *Clarion*:

*Mrs Pankhurst and a few other women in earnest, are starting a new crusade this year to force the Labour Party to work for women. They feel that in the past women have been too apologetic for their existence, and too submissive. Now they intend to boldly assert their claim to an equal share with men in the results of the labour struggle.*<sup>xii</sup>

So what we seem to have late in 1903 is a small group of women who were already active in the ILP being called together by Emmeline Pankhurst. The key elements were that this was a group of women active in mixed-sex politics but who were concerned about women's political and social inequality including, but at this stage not limited to, the vote. Their primary constituency seems to have been working women. I will return to the early WSPU and the extent to which it was any or all of these things later. But first, I want to look at the context for the formation of the WSPU and ask a series of questions: Why Manchester? Why the Pankhursts? and Why 1903?

## Why Manchester?

Nineteenth-century Manchester was an energetic and self-confident city which saw itself as at the forefront of the nation's and the empire's commercial and industrial development.<sup>xiii</sup> Yet similar things might be said of Bristol or Glasgow, so what was particular about Manchester? Firstly, the city had a radical tradition. It had been the site of important struggles for citizenship such as Peterloo. Manchester had been the home of the radical liberalism embodied in the Anti-Corn Law League and had seen fights for freedom of speech, such as at Boggart Hole Clough in 1896 where a key participant was Emmeline Pankhurst.

Secondly, Manchester had a history of agitation for women's suffrage. In 1867, at the time of the Second Reform Act, Manchester had taken the lead in forming a Society for Women's Suffrage. Richard Pankhurst sat on its first executive and was an active suffragist long before he married Emmeline. So began years of constitutional campaigning spearheaded in those early years by Lydia Becker. By the end of the nineteenth century, Becker was dead but the Manchester-based North of England Society for Women's Suffrage (a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) had a new generation of leaders. Esther Roper had been its secretary since 1893. The focus of the Society remained on petitioning parliament and to that end it was campaigning with and amongst Lancashire women textile workers. This is the story told in Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.<sup>xiv</sup> The point to be remembered here is that by 1903 the struggle for women's suffrage had been going on for decades in Manchester but could hardly be described as a mass movement. The links with the new moves for independent labour representation and the focus on the women cotton workers, whose union dues paid for parliamentary candidates for whom the women could not vote, showed promise for the new century but all recognised it could be a long road.

Thirdly, Manchester was a lively centre for labour and socialist politics. From the 1880s socialists had been organising in the Manchester area: one of the strongest Social Democratic Federation branches was in South Salford; Robert Blatchford had launched the *Clarion* newspaper in Manchester; and the early impetus for a new party to break with Liberalism and promote independent labour representation had been in Manchester. The founding conference of the ILP in 1893 may have been in Bradford but Manchester always had a strong presence in the party. There was also a wider socialist culture represented by such diverse activities as Labour Churches, Socialist Sunday Schools, Clarion Cycling Groups and Clarion Choirs. Many socialists were also active in the trade union

movement and in organisations such as the local Trades Council and the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade Union Council.

Yet how important were these Manchester traditions to the formation and early years of the WSPU? The Pankhursts as a family gained considerable political experience through the radical, suffragist and latterly socialist politics of the city. Richard and Emmeline joined the ILP in 1894.<sup>xv</sup> They were also Fabians for a time. Richard died in 1898 and Emmeline resigned from the Fabian Society over its support for the Boer War. She was elected as an ILP candidate for the Chorlton Board of Guardians in 1894. In 1900 Emmeline was elected to the Manchester School Board, again as an ILP candidate. She was also active in the party nationally, regularly attending the annual party conference and sitting on the party's executive in 1898, 1904 and 1906. More importantly from the Manchester perspective, local ILP records show that she was active in her local branch.

When Sylvia began the first of her histories of the suffrage movement which appeared as a series in *Votes for Women* in 1908, she dwelt at great length on the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement implying that the by now militant WSPU was the heir to these earlier battles. Her account of the formation of the WSPU itself owed little to these suffragist antecedents except that she suggested Emmeline's sense of the urgency of the women's suffrage demand was reawakened by Christabel's involvement with the North of England Society, particularly with Miss Roper and Miss Gore-Booth. 'She now felt it her duty to do everything that she could do to force the question into the forefront of practical politics - even if this should mean the giving up of all her other work.'<sup>xvi</sup> In many ways the continuity with the earlier suffrage activism was represented by the presence alongside WSPU speakers and at demonstrations of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, based at Congleton, but who had been a significant figure in Manchester suffrage politics for decades and who was at the centre of an extensive correspondence network of other suffragists.<sup>xvii</sup>

Yet how important was Manchester itself to the early WSPU? Some WSPU members were conscious of being part of a tradition. For some it was a personal tradition, as when WSPU activist Hannah Mitchell discovered from her family after her first arrest, that her grandfather had been a local Chartist.<sup>xviii</sup> London-based Dora Montefiore who joined the WSPU in January 1904 referred directly to Peterloo as an inspiration. After the famous Free Trade Hall meeting in October 1905, she replied to correspondents who criticised interruptions made by women at political meetings. She referred to an old engraving of Peterloo in which you could see a woman on the platform with a banner that read Universal Suffrage. Dora told the readers of her column in *New Age*, 'I look upon her as a direct political ancestress'.<sup>xix</sup> Indeed she used postcards depicting this scene when she acknowledged donations to a fund to help working women attend suffrage demonstrations.<sup>xx</sup> When she described the WSPU to an enthusiastic audience at the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference in Copenhagen in the summer of 1906 she spoke of the discontent amongst working women *naturally culminating* in Manchester.<sup>xxi</sup> For many there was already an association between Manchester and radicalism, suffrage and even working women.

Most of all Manchester provided a network of sympathetic women and men whose support would foster the new organisation. For example, Teresa Billington was already active in the Manchester Settlement and had raised her head above the parapet as a teacher who refused to teach religious education. Before she joined the WSPU in the winter of 1903-4, she was already speaking to local groups and was becoming active in the ILP. She was to become the ILP's first woman organiser in 1905 on Emmeline Pankhurst's recommendation.<sup>xxii</sup> Her organising skills were to be crucial in moving the WSPU into the public spotlight after the arrest of Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst at the Free Trade Hall rally in October 1905. Other local working women who were to be early WSPU members such as Hannah Mitchell and Jennie Baines brought with them years of political experience.<sup>xxiii</sup> The support of ILP men like Sam Robinson was also to be crucial in providing space for WSPU speakers, such as at the regular Central Manchester ILP's open air meetings at Tib Street on Sunday evenings.<sup>xxiv</sup> Later when crowds grew more unpredictable many of the local ILP men not only chaired meetings for the women but acted as bodyguards. Hannah Mitchell, for one, wrote of her gratitude for this practical support.<sup>xxv</sup>

Manchester was also important to the early WSPU as it came to recognise the importance of publicity to it as a pressure group. Two of the national socialist newspapers of the time, the *Clarion* and the *Labour Leader*, were based in the city. In this relatively small world this meant it was easier for the WSPU to get coverage, as in, for example, 'The Movement' column in *Labour Leader*.

### Why the Pankhursts?

Local evidence makes clear just what high esteem Emmeline Pankhurst was held in by many of the radical networks in Manchester. Whenever her local branch of the ILP sought a delegate for a conference or a representative on a local body their first choice seems to have been Mrs Pankhurst.<sup>xxvi</sup> This was particularly the case *after* the formation of the WSPU. Even though the early WSPU was almost entirely populated by ILPers, the local ILP did not perceive the WSPU as a rival or dissident group. After October 1903 the numbers of women participating in



**Mrs Pankhurst, Christabel and friends in the garden of their family home in Manchester, 1898**

branch meetings increased and few meetings occurred without one Pankhurst being present. Indeed on 8 August 1905, the Central Manchester ILP branch was attended not only by Mrs Pankhurst but also by her children, Christabel, Sylvia, Adela and Harry.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Moreover, Emmeline was also 'well-networked' in the ILP nationally. Most of the leading propagandists had stayed at the Pankhurst home. Still she was not quite famous enough to make the 1905 series of 'Postcard Portraits of Well Known Labour Men and Women' produced by the ILP. The only women included were Isabella Ford, Margaret MacMillan, Mrs Philip(!) Snowden and the late Carrie Martyn and Enid Stacy.

Some contemporaries were ambivalent about Christabel Pankhurst, although not all were as harsh as J. Bruce Glasier who wrote in his diary in 1902, 'Christabel paints her eyebrows grossly and looks selfish, lazy and wilful. They [mother and daughter] want to be ladies not workers and lack the humility of real heroism.'<sup>xxviii</sup> But there was generally an admiration for Emmeline. Teresa Billington remembered her as 'a very wonderful woman, very beautiful, very gracious, very persuasive.' But she added:

*To work alongside of her day by day was to run the risk of losing yourself. She was ruthless in using the followers she gathered around her as she was ruthless to herself. She took advantage of both their strengths and their weaknesses, laid on them the burden of unprepared action, refused to excuse weakness, boomed and boosted the novice into sham maturity, refused maturity a hearing, suffered with you and for you while she believed she was shaping you and used every device of suppression when the revolt against the shaping came.<sup>xxix</sup>*

Although these observations were made after Billington had fallen out with the Pankhursts, they nevertheless give a powerful picture of Emmeline's capacity for leadership which she was to discover as the WSPU developed.

As for the Pankhurst children, the power of their own family tradition was apparent. Although Sylvia, Adela and even Harry were to all give copious commitment and energy to the WSPU, it was in many ways always Christabel and Emmeline's 'show'. In the early years of the WSPU Christabel was finding her feet, as a speaker and an activist, in addition to her studies as a student at Manchester University. She often attended Manchester Central ILP meetings and during 1904 and 1905 spoke at ILP meetings usually although not exclusively on women's suffrage, such as in September 1905 when she spoke to Middlesborough ILP on the Feeding of School Children and on the Unemployed Act.<sup>xxx</sup> This was part of a fortnight's lecture tour she undertook for the ILP in the North East. These activities were undertaken despite the fact that she had published a number of letters critical of Labour men who failed to prioritise women's suffrage. In 1903 she wrote, 'There is, after all, little to choose between an enemy and a friend who does nothing'.<sup>xxxi</sup> As yet this did not mark her out as an anti-socialist for there was a strong strand amongst socialist women that was critical of the chasm between the rhetoric and practice of socialist men.<sup>xxxii</sup> Nevertheless, there was always a sense with Christabel



**Teresa Billington Greig**

that the ILP was part of her family inheritance rather than something to which she had made an ideological commitment or to which she had been converted. As a critical Teresa Billington Greig later wrote, 'I have always believed there was hope for this Labour conversion policy, while Christabel only endured it till her time came.'<sup>xxxiii</sup> What Christabel brought to the nascent WSPU was her enthusiasm, her lawyer's brain, her vehemence in the debates with adult suffragists like Ada Nield Chew, charisma (which attracted followers like Annie Kenney) and a certain recklessness (demonstrated in the Free Trade Hall incident).

### Why 1903?

There are two issues here - why was the WSPU formed when it was? and, is this really the most significant date for us to be celebrating? By 1903 activity around the demand for women's suffrage had revived around what Jill Liddington and Jill Norris have called the radical suffragists and the petitioning by women textile workers for enfranchisement.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Days after the WSPU was quietly formed in Manchester a key meeting was held in London - the National Convention in Defence of the Civic Rights of Women - which brought together societies from the NUWSS, from the Irish women's suffrage movement and the Women's Local Government Society. Dora Montefiore commented on this meeting which she had helped to organise with the journalist W.T. Stead and with Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy:

*Everything that she had heard of the working women that day had made her feel a thrill of real power and purpose*

*behind. We had that power not only in London, but all over the country. She thought all our efforts during the next few months should be given to pushing this measure, with the working women behind us.'*<sup>xxxv</sup>

Coverage in radical newspapers on the topic of women's suffrage was also increasing in 1903, much of it emphasising the key role that working women might play. At the same time Christabel's critical remarks about the ILP's timidity, that it 'dared not offend the prejudices of the British working man',<sup>xxxvi</sup> were flagging up the need for a woman's space on the Left. It was not coincidental that the SDF's women's organisations (Socialist Women's Circles) were inaugurated the following year, 1904.<sup>xxxvii</sup> There was no attempt to make the WSPU the women's organisation of the ILP, indeed most of the leading ILP women were opposed to separate women's organisations. But the WSPU was, albeit in a minor way, reflecting some of the ambivalence women felt about the priority given to women's concerns in the politics of the Left.

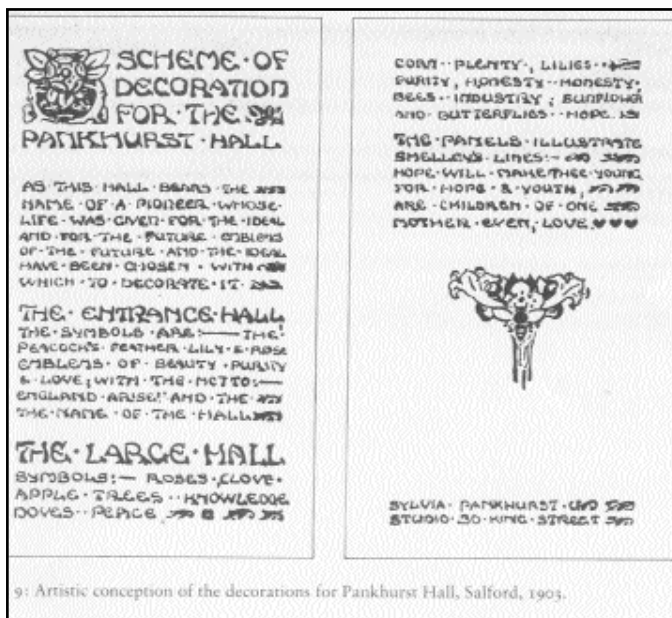
A crucial part of the context for the evolution of the WSPU was the contemporary debate about tactics. What was the best demand to make? Should it be governed by principle or pragmatism? Should it be votes for women on the same terms as men (which meant a property franchise - known as limited women's suffrage) or should it be votes for all those currently unenfranchised (all women and forty per cent of men - known as adult suffrage) or should it be votes for all women (womanhood suffrage)? In the earliest years of the WSPU the debate was sharpest around Limited versus Adult Suffrage. This was for a number of reasons. The issue regularly divided the Labour Representation Committee conferences of the time and it was a debate that reverberated through the letter pages of *Clarion* and *Labour Leader* - a famous spat was between Christabel Pankhurst and Ada Nield Chew<sup>xxxviii</sup>. Moreover the controversy was fuelled by the fact that both sides sought to caricature each other's arguments, using the enfranchisement of working women as their main area of contention. The central question was always whose bill or demand would enfranchise the most *working-class* women.

The specific context for the early years of the WSPU was the Women's Enfranchisement Bill which was before parliament in 1905, and the formation of the Adult Suffrage Society in 1904. This meant that 'Limited versus Adult Suffrage' was the debate of the hour. Yet at this stage the debate was not as polarised as it was to become and many supporters of 'limited' women's suffrage couched their arguments in terms of their broader commitment to adult suffrage as the desired goal. Thus Emmeline Pankhurst in 1905 claimed that the Enfranchisement Bill was not a limited but an equality bill and that adult suffrage was the position that 'we all desire and strive for'.<sup>xxxix</sup> Similarly, Dora Montefiore argued that a limited suffrage demand was only a tactic towards full adult suffrage.<sup>xl</sup>

The implications of this debate for socialist women (and hence for the membership and often the audience for the early WSPU) are explored in June Hannam's and my *Socialist Women*.<sup>xli</sup> Without the context of this debate over tactics, an important means of understanding the WSPU and its growing and changing membership is absent.

## The formation of the WSPU

I now want to return to the question of why Emmeline called the meeting on 10 October 1903: there was no overriding reason. Most of the secondary accounts rehearse the same explanations. These include the story of Pankhurst Hall which was built in Salford to commemorate Richard Pankhurst. The story is usually told that although Sylvia was asked to decorate the hall, which she did without payment, she and her mother were shocked to discover that the ILP branch who used the hall would not admit women members. Emmeline is supposed to have said, 'We must have an independent women's movement.



### Sylvia Pankhurst's conception of the decoration for Pankhurst Hall, Salford, 1903

Come to my house tomorrow and we will arrange it'.<sup>xlii</sup> A good story and often repeated. But I am sceptical. I can find no evidence that North Salford ILP operated such a discriminatory policy at Pankhurst Hall which went against the whole spirit and rules of the ILP, and which no one commented on at the time. In addition, the timing seems all wrong. In November 1904, the fourth anniversary of the opening of the hall was advertised which suggests that it was well open by October 1903.<sup>xliii</sup> In addition, not only Emmeline but also Sylvia herself spoke at Pankhurst Hall after the formation of the WSPU in the early months of 1904 - Sylvia on 'Some principles of decoration'. The Pankhurst connection was also sustained by Adela arranging a cantata based on a Walter Crane poem for a grand concert held by the local ILP in the Pankhurst Hall in January 1904. If the events were as they are usually repeated one would have thought the Pankhurst family would have given the hall a wide berth for more than a few months. In addition, in Sylvia's early accounts of the formation of the Union, this story is absent only to be 'remembered' by her many years later. It is not clear that there was one event that triggered the formation of the WSPU, however neat and tidy that would be.

### Was 1903 really that significant?

It could be argued that other dates in WSPU history were more significant than the year of its formation. Even in WSPU folklore



Adela Pankhurst

the instigation of militancy is usually given the greatest prominence, for that is when the WSPU became a distinctive organisation. This is usually dated to the interruption by Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst of the Liberal Party meeting at the Free Trade Hall on 13 October 1905, when they failed to get an answer to the question, 'Will the Liberal Government give women the vote?' Arrested for disorderly behaviour, obstruction and, in Christabel's case, assault (did she or did she not spit at a policeman?), the women's refusal to pay a fine and consequent serving of a sentence in Strangeways might have soon been forgotten but for the organising skills of Teresa Billington. She was now a paid organiser for the ILP and it was she who kept the issue before the public while the women were in prison and then organised a huge meeting to greet their release, with national speakers such as Keir Hardie.<sup>xliv</sup>

There might also be a case for arguing that the six-week siege of Dora Montefiore's home in Hammersmith by bailiffs in May and June 1906 was a significant event in the making of the WSPU. Under the banner 'Women should vote for the laws they obey and the taxes they pay', Dora engaged in passive



Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst on their release from Strangeways Prison, October 1905

resistance and gained extensive newspaper coverage including in the new picture papers, like the *Daily Mirror*.<sup>xlv</sup> WSPU members regularly held meetings outside her house and she addressed the crowd from an upstairs window. This was a form of non-violent militancy that captured the imagination of many.

Yet it could also be suggested that the key date for the translation of the WSPU from a provincial to a national campaign, and to one which broadened its appeal beyond the working-class women of Lancashire (and of the East End of London) was the arrest of eleven WSPU supporters on 23 October 1906 as they lobbied the House of Commons. Amongst the arrested was Annie Cobden-Sanderson - daughter of the Anti-Corn Law Leaguer and Radical, Richard Cobden. As the suffragist Florence Fenwick Miller said, '[y]ou have taken, and are treating as a felon, a daughter of the great Cobden, the man who gave you the cheap loaf'.<sup>xlvi</sup> Cobden-Sanderson's presence along with other middle-class women provoked widespread uproar. Letters were written to *The Times*, the Liberal government was briefly embarrassed, 'polite society' was roused and donations poured into the WSPU. Teresa Billington Greig later wrote, "These militant suffragettes are actually ladies!" was the gasping cry: and straightway most of us were ladies again, and the rebel woman was veneered over or given hasty burial.<sup>xlvii</sup> Although it would be erroneous to see this as the collapse of working-class support for the WSPU and its divorce from its ILP origins, this was a turning point. It was a turning point for the future character of the WSPU as it developed as a national organisation and it was a turning point in how the WSPU came to be represented - as a woman-only, cross-class, non-party militant organisation focused exclusively on the demand for limited suffrage and led by two charismatic women, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

Eva Gore-Booth, writing on behalf of working-class suffragists to Millicent Fawcett (leader of the NUWSS), underlined the distance that the WSPU had travelled from its origins amongst the largely working-class women of the ILP in Manchester: 'It is not the fact of demonstrations or even violence that is offensive to them, it is being mixed up and held accountable as a class for educated and upper class women who kick, shriek, bite and spit. ...It is not the rioting but the *kind* of rioting'.<sup>xlviii</sup>

To be successful, the WSPU left behind Manchester and the culture and issues which had brought it into being in 1903 as a tiny organisation in a British provincial city. What it took with it was the experience gleaned by the Pankhurst women in Manchester - their direct experience in the politics of the city and within the ILP - and their observations of successful political tactics such as the riots of unemployed men in the city in 1905.<sup>xlix</sup> Some of the women who joined the Manchester-

based WSPU were to stay with the organisation (Flora Drummond, Jennie Baines) but Teresa Billington and Hannah Mitchell would soon be part of the Women's Freedom League while Dora Montefiore became an activist in the Adult Suffrage Society. The Manchester WSPU - the mother union, as it was known - continued to grow after the Pankhurst family left Nelson Street for London. Its interaction with the local politics of Manchester still needs to be more fully explored, just as the early years of the WSPU need to be seen as more than a chapter in the lives of the members of the Pankhurst family.

## Reflections on the centenary of the WSPU

So what does a rethinking of its early years add to our understanding of the WSPU, as we celebrate the centenary of its formation? First of all, it reminds us to recognise and then to question the many narratives that exist of the formation and nature of a significant political organisation. Not only do we need to place the differing views of contemporaries in their context as well as mapping the WSPU into the wider political landscape, we also need to go back to the evidence (the minute books, the newspapers and so on) to read them with a sensitivity shaped by the years of recent suffrage scholarship. We know that Sylvia's account of the WSPU has been enormously influential and that it was part memoir, part history and part self-justification. Despite the recognition of the partiality of her account and the problematic autobiographies of Christabel and Emmeline, these texts written long after the events they describe are still surprisingly central to the work of recent biographers of the Pankhursts. I know as I write the biography of the as yet lesser-known Dora Montefiore that I have to treat her absorbing autobiography with great care. It was partly her experience of the early years of the WSPU, her challenge to the story Sylvia was constructing in 1908, and the suggestive differences between her later account of the suffrage movement and her contemporary journalism, newspaper reports, records and correspondence that made me want to look at this period of WSPU history again. It is so often skipped over in the desire to get to the more familiar and dramatic part of the story, yet rethinking the early years of the WSPU draws us back to examining within a very specific context a series of inter-relationships: that between the demands for Adult Suffrage and Limited Women's Suffrage; that between socialists and the WSPU; that between the local and the national campaign; that between male and female supporters of women's enfranchisement; that between working-class and middle-class suffragists; and that between leaders and the rank-and-file. Rethinking the early years of the WSPU gives us another perspective on what remains often the only area of women's history that a school pupil will encounter. Celebrating the centenary of the WSPU gives us the opportunity once and for all to ditch the simple narratives and the stereotypes for a more complex and nuanced set of stories.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> E. Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914); E.S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London, 1931, reprinted 1977); C. Pankhurst, *Unshackled: the Story of how we won the Vote* (London, 1959).

<sup>ii</sup> H. Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up* (London, 1968); D.B. Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (1927); M. Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (1962); C. Lytton, *Prisons and Prisoners* (London, 1914); A. Kenney, *Memories of a Militant* (London, 1924); C. McPhee and A. Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Non-Violent Militant. Selected Writings of Teresa Billington Greig* (London, 1987).

- iii R. Pankhurst, 'Sylvia Pankhurst in perspective. Some comments on Patricia Romero's biography *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of Radical, Women's Studies International Forum*, 11 (1988), pp. 245-62; 'The Pankhursts – politics and passion', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 25 Jan. 2002.
- iv S. Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1996), p. 249.
- v Manchester Reference Library Archives, M42/1/1, Manchester Central ILP Minute Book.
- vi *Clarion*, 30 Oct. 1903.
- vii *Votes for Women*, 8 Oct. 1908.
- viii *Clarion*, 30 Oct. 1903.
- ix Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p. 168.
- x *Clarion*, 13 Nov. 1903.
- xi *New Age*, 24 Dec. 1903.
- xii *Clarion*, 1 Jan. 1904.
- xiii G.S. Messinger, *Manchester in the Victorian Age. The Half-Known City* (Manchester, 1985); A. Kidd, *Manchester* (Keele, 1993).
- xiv J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1978).
- xv Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p.119
- xvi *Votes for Women*, 8 Oct. 1908.
- xvii For Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy see her entry in E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London, 2001), pp. 188-206 and Holton, *Suffrage Days*, chap. 1. For the correspondence network, see K. Hunt, 'Journeying through suffrage: the politics of Dora Montefiore', in C. Eustance, J. Ryan and L. Ugolini (eds.), *A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History* (Leicester, 2000).
- xviii Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 163.
- xix *New Age*, 18 Jan. 1906.
- xx *New Age*, 15 Feb. 1906.
- xxi *New Age*, 16 Aug. 1906 (my italics).
- xxii McPhee and Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Non-Violent Militant*, p. 99.
- xxiii For Jennie Baines, see J. Smart, 'Jennie Baines: Suffrage and an Australian Connection', in J. Purvis and S.S. Holton (eds.), *Votes for Women* (London, 2000).
- xxiv See 'Directory' of ILP meetings listed weekly in *Labour Leader*, for example 8 July 1904; Manchester Central ILP Minute Book, 26 April 1904.
- xxv Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, p. 177. See also K. Cowman, "'Incipient Toryism"? The Women's Social and Political Union and the Independent Labour Party, 1903-14', *History Workshop Journal*, 53 (2002), pp. 128-48.
- xxvi For example, Manchester Central ILP Minute Book, 28 July 1903, 9 Feb. 1904, 2 May 1905.
- xxvii Manchester Central ILP Minute Book, 8 Aug. 1905.
- xxviii John Bruce Glasier Diary, 19 October 1902 quoted in M. Pugh, *The Pankhursts* (West Drayton, 2001), p.101.
- xxix McPhee and Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Non-Violent Militant*, pp. 94-5.
- xxx *Labour Leader*, 29 Sept. 1905.
- xxxi *Labour Leader*, 30 May 1903.
- xxxii See J. Hannam and K. Hunt, *Socialist Women. Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002). For suffrage, see chap. 5.
- xxxiii T. Billington Greig quoted in Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.174.
- xxxiv Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.
- xxxv *Women's Suffrage Record*, December 1903.
- xxxvi *ILP News*, August 1903.
- xxxvii For Socialist Women's circles, see K. Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: the Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge, 1996), chap. 9.
- xxxviii For example, *Clarion*, 16 Dec. 1904, 6 Jan. 1905, 20 Jan. 1905, 17 Feb. 1905.
- xxxix *Labour Leader*, 3 Feb. 1905; *Clarion*, 24 Feb. 1905.
- xl See Hunt, 'Journeying Through Suffrage'.
- xli Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*.
- xliv Pugh, *The Pankhursts* (2001), p. 106.
- xlvi *Labour Leader*, 4 Nov. 1904.
- xlvii *Labour Leader*, 20 Oct., 27 Oct. 1905. The ILP's leadership had already seconded Billington to work as an organiser for Central Manchester ILP for the month of October 1905 (Manchester Central ILP Minute Book, 19 Sept. 1905).
- xlv For example *Daily Mirror*, 25 May 1906; *Daily Express*, 26 May 1906; *The Times*, 25 May 1906.
- xlvi Quoted in M. Phillips, *The Ascent of Woman. A History of the Suffragette Movement and the Ideas Behind It* (London, 2003), p. 184.
- xlvii T. Billington Greig, *The Militant Suffrage Movement* (1911), reprinted in McPhee and FitzGerald (eds.), *The Non-Violent Militant*, p.164.
- xlviii Eva Gore-Booth, quoted in Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p. 205-6.
- xlvi A. Kidd, 'The Social Democratic Federation and popular agitation amongst the unemployed in Edwardian Manchester', *International Review of Social History*, 29 (1984), pp. 336-58.