

Alissa Young

‘Deeds, not Words: The Story of Emmeline Pankhurst’

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Emmeline Pankhurst is considered by many to be the quintessential symbol of the suffragette movement. During her lifetime she was both loved and reviled by her contemporaries, and her obituary claimed that she would ‘certainly live in British history. She shook the women of England awake.’¹ Yet Emmeline’s story is far more complex, and her contributions to the women’s movement have undergone a great deal of debate. While some praise her suffragette movement for raising awareness and support, others viewed the militant movement as damaging to the cause of universal suffrage and criticized it for giving the government an excuse to deny women the vote.² Other historians question whether the suffragettes had any true impact on the passage of legislation, or if women’s suffrage was granted as a result of their contribution to the First World War.³ Furthermore, while Emmeline is often considered the organizer of the suffragette movement, in many cases she appeared to be more of a figurehead than a leader. Indeed, many of the militant tactics of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) were adopted retrospectively, after other suffragettes had used them. Despite ambiguity about the success of the suffragettes and the position she held within her organization, however, Emmeline nonetheless had a profound impact on the women’s suffrage movement.

¹ Paula Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst* (London, 2002), 241.

² Paula Bartley, *Votes for Women 1860-1928* (London, 1998), 64.

³ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914* (Princeton, 1987), 223.

When Emmeline Pankhurst was born in 1858, England was a country sharply divided along gender lines. Education for females was strictly limited, often focusing little on reading and writing and primarily teaching domestic skills like sewing and cooking.⁴ Emmeline felt this lack in particular when she was sent to school. While her parents were gravely concerned with the education of her brothers, Emmeline's was of little importance, aside from the gentility of the headmistress and students. In her autobiography, Emmeline recalled the words of her father one night while she pretended to sleep, saying 'what a pity she wasn't born a lad.'⁵ If she had been born a boy, she would have benefited from a comprehensive education and would have been able to pursue a variety of careers.

Women, on the other hand, were expected to remain in the home to take care of the family. When they did work, women usually occupied positions in domestic service, textiles, and other unskilled jobs.⁶ Most women were expected to marry, and in doing so lost the few rights they had. The husband retained all privileges to property and children through *couverture*, which subsumed a married woman's legal status with her husband's.⁷ But perhaps the most striking aspect of the times – and the issue that would later influence Emmeline Pankhurst the most – was the lack of suffrage for women. Despite numerous bills extending voting rights to the male population, women were consistently denied the vote; an injustice Emmeline would dedicate her life to changing.

In many ways Emmeline Pankhurst's work was a reflection of her times; the continuation of a forty-year campaign by women appealing for more than the vote. The women's suffrage movement began in earnest in 1866 with a petition circulated by Barbara Bodichon, Jessie

⁴ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 2.

⁵ Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London, 1914), 5-6.

⁶ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 3.

⁷ Shani D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family', *Women's History in Britain, 1850-1945*, ed. June Purvis (London, 1995), 54.

Boucherette, Emily Davies, and Elizabeth Garrett. The petition gained nearly 1,500 signatures, and one year later MP John Stuart Mill introduced an amendment to the Reform Act that would replace the word 'man' with 'person,' thus extending the same voting rights to both genders.⁸ While the amendment did not pass, the actions of the suffragists inspired and drove a growing movement for change in England.

Indeed, Emmeline's early years would in many ways be defined by the ideas of reformers. Both of her parents were advocates of universal suffrage, despite their insistence that their daughter maintain traditional female occupations. This contradiction led Emmeline to question her beliefs and gender stereotypes. While she was educated at a typical middle-class girls' school and was expected to conform to social norms, Emmeline rebelled against conventional women's roles. At age fourteen Emmeline heard Lydia Becker, editor of *Woman's Suffrage Journal*, speak at a suffrage meeting; she would claim that it was on that day she became a suffragist.⁹

Emmeline would marry young, though her choice in husband was very much in keeping with her progressive attitudes. Dr. Richard Pankhurst was over twenty years her senior and was an avid supporter of the suffrage movement, promoting women's rights as a barrister.¹⁰ In fact, Dr. Pankhurst drafted the Women's Disabilities Removal Bill, the first bill for women's enfranchisement.¹¹ Despite her role as a wife and mother, Emmeline would continue to work towards suffrage for women, though her prominence in the movement would not be established until after the death of her husband.

⁸ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 185-7.

⁹ June Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, May 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35376>, accessed 12 Oct 2009].

¹⁰ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 25-26.

¹¹ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 11.

Emmeline Pankhurst was active in politics throughout her adult life, but arguably her greatest contribution to the suffrage movement occurred in 1903 when she formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The WSPU was established as a reaction to the exclusion of women in certain aspects of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which refused to allow women to join the branch of the ILP that would be housed in the hall built in memory of Dr. Pankhurst.¹² Despite all the support Emmeline has provided to the organization, women were still not full members. However, during the early years of the WSPU, the two organizations often worked together, with the WSPU focusing on female concerns.¹³ Furthermore, there were several other groups advocating universal suffrage and the extension of equal rights. The only novel feature of the early WSPU was its exclusion of male members. While Emmeline herself insisted she was not anti-male, and her family life seems to substantiate that claim, she insisted that the organization was 'not fighting against men, but *for* women.'¹⁴ Because the cause was to promote suffrage for women, it was women who should band together and work towards the vote.

The early period of the WSPU was relatively calm, adopting the tactics of its contemporaries. The primary focus was on peaceful demonstrations, campaigning in public venues and at trade union meetings, as well as petitioning Parliament.¹⁵ These first months are often overlooked by history, overshadowed by the more radical actions of the militant suffragette movement. Even Pankhurst herself skims over the period in her autobiography, dedicating a scant few pages to the first eighteen months of the organization as she 'continued the work of organizing for the WSPU.'¹⁶ However, this time was crucial in developing the WSPU as it is recognized today. The lack of response from the government to peaceful tactics would be the

¹² Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928).'

¹³ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 72.

¹⁴ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 73.

¹⁵ Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928).'

¹⁶ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 38-41.

turning point in the suffragette movement, providing the incentive for a new approach by the reformers. When the House of Commons attempted to ‘talk out’ the Women’s Enfranchisement Bill on May 12, 1905, delaying the proceedings with ‘silly stories and foolish jokes,’ the WSPU decided to change its strategy.¹⁷

It would be its militant agenda that would set the WSPU – as well as Emmeline herself – apart from other suffragists. Emmeline and her supporters were unwilling to continue a policy that had failed for nearly half a century, instead adapting and evolving in a novel direction. The defining moment of the militant campaign occurred in 1905 when Emmeline’s daughter Christabel and fellow WSPU member Annie Kenney interrupted a Liberal election meeting. The two women unveiled a banner proclaiming ‘Votes for Women’ and asked the gathering ‘Will the Liberal Government give votes to women?’¹⁸ For their actions the pair received a short prison sentence, setting the precedent for the militant WSPU. Thus it was not Emmeline herself that began using militant tactics, but instead it was her daughter that would lead this new movement.

These measures, while far more peaceful than those that would define the later years of the organization, were considered radical at the time. The term ‘suffragette’ would be coined by the *Daily Mail* in 1906 to illustrate the differences between the peaceful, law-abiding ‘suffragists’ like the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the more militant WSPU.¹⁹ Harold L. Smith would later identify three main stages of the suffragette movement: civil disobedience, mild threats to public order, and the escalation of attacks on public and private property.²⁰

¹⁷ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 41-3.

¹⁸ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 78.

¹⁹ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 35.

²⁰ Harold L. Smith, *The British Women’s Suffrage Campaign 1866-1928* (Harlow, 1998), 30-1.

It was during the militant years of the WSPU that Emmeline took a leadership position in the organization and that the WSPU motto of ‘Deeds not Words’ became more than a slogan. In 1907 the suffragettes organized the ‘Mud March,’ in which 3,000 marched through Hyde Park with banners and brass bands. The WSPU also heckled politicians at meetings and marched on Parliament when their demands went unanswered.²¹ This nonviolent, mild form of protest would nonetheless lead to prison sentences for the reformers, providing them with publicity for their cause. As the policies and campaigns became more militant, the structure of the WSPU also began to change. Emmeline and her daughter Christabel took greater control of the organization, and those who disagreed with the changes left and formed their own groups. The Women’s Freedom League, for example, was created after Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington-Greig, and Edith How-Martyn left the WSPU.²² Emmeline and Christabel became more and more integral to the management of the WSPU, turning the organization’s focus to militancy.

While Emmeline Pankhurst would often find herself among the suffragettes in prison, in the early years of militancy she did not personally lead many of these deputations, though she did help organize them. Instead, she focused her efforts on reducing the Liberal majority in Parliament.²³ Indeed, the campaigns of the WSPU after 1905 were not solely militant; peaceful tactics were often employed alongside more sensational ones. The WSPU published *Votes for Women*, an increasingly popular circular in London.²⁴ Emmeline in particular made speeches to the public and organized demonstrations and exhibitions. Perhaps her most ambitious demonstration occurred on July 21, 1907, when over 250,000 Britons assembled in Hyde Park in response to the declaration of the Home Secretary that ‘power belongs to masses, and through

²¹ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 197.

²² Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford, 1997), 163.

²³ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 86.

²⁴ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 110.

this power a Government can be influenced.’²⁵ He was referring to the precedent presented by men in history, who were able to bring about great change through mass movements.

Unfortunately, the same tactics did not appear to work for women. It is not surprising that, after being disappointed in her peaceful efforts towards change, Emmeline Pankhurst and the WSPU turned towards a more active militant agenda in 1908.

The first recorded window smashing occurred in 1908 when Prime Minister Asquith refused a deputation of suffragettes. Although not instigated by Emmeline, she would quickly adopt the method of protest, claiming that “‘the argument of the broken window pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics.’”²⁶ This represented a turning point in the militant movement, as the WSPU moved past peaceful protests and deputations towards actual destruction of property. Other tactics were also employed, with some women chaining themselves to the Ladies Gallery in Parliament, breaking up meetings, and the destruction of letter boxes.²⁷ The women of the WSPU were now actively striving to be arrested, wanting the publicity that such actions would generate.

Once in prison, the suffragettes turned to yet another method of demonstration: the hunger strike. Unlike their male counterparts, suffragettes were charged and sentenced as common criminals rather than political prisoners.²⁸ To protest this unfair treatment, and to gain sympathy for their cause, suffragettes refused to eat in prison. In response, the authorities began using the controversial method of forcibly feeding the prisoners, a violent action that was compared to rape by those who experienced it.²⁹ Emmeline herself would take part in hunger strikes during her many stays in prison. After being arrested for having ‘counselled and

²⁵ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 111-13.

²⁶ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 56.

²⁷ Caine, *English Feminism*, 162.

²⁸ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 198.

²⁹ Smith, *British Women’s Suffrage*, 37.

procured' several women who participated in a series of guerilla tactics, she declared in court: 'I shall fight, I shall fight, I shall fight, from the moment I enter prison to struggle against overwhelming odds.'³⁰ While Emmeline was not the first to utilize this tactic, she became the figurehead of the movement. Furthermore, her numerous imprisonments and the ill health she developed from hunger striking served to galvanize the WSPU. Due to the debilitating effects of hunger striking, Emmeline and her followers were often released early, leading the government to enforce the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act, which would be dubbed the 'Cat and Mouse Act' by the suffragettes.³¹ Thus as soon as they were healthy, the suffragettes could be arrested again to continue their sentences.

There remained a great deal of opposition to Emmeline's cause, especially among men. The suffragettes of the WSPU were challenging gender roles that had remained unchanged for centuries, and many were uninterested in reforming them. To anti-suffragists the militant movement showed that women were unstable and hysterical, which served as proof that they should not be granted the vote. Writers like George Dangerfield viewed the movement as farce, commenting that from 'the spectacle of women attacking men there rises an outrageous, an unprincipled laughter.'³²

While some refused to take the WSPU's cause seriously, others were quite violently opposed to it. Perhaps the most graphic example of this hostility took place on November 18, 1910, a day now known as 'Black Friday.' Emmeline and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson led a march of three hundred suffragists and suffragettes to Parliament Square and were confronted by police. Rather than arresting the protesters, for six hours the women were subjected to battery

³⁰ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 298.

³¹ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 76.

³² Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 79.

and sexual harassment from the police and crowd.³³ According to Emmeline's account, one hundred and nineteen men and women were arrested, 'most of them bruised and choked and otherwise injured.'³⁴ One woman, Ellen Pitfield, would die of the injuries she received that day.³⁵ Despite the unwarranted brutality of the police, over one hundred protesters were arrested, their only crime a peaceful demonstration.

In 1913 Parliament dropped the Manhood Suffrage Bill for the session, which if passed would have provided universal suffrage. In response, the WSPU escalated its militancy, using such tactics as arson, bombing, cutting telegraph lines, and large-scale window smashing campaigns.³⁶ For the next year the suffragettes essentially declared war on the government that had refused to listen to their demands. The renewed fervor of the movement was captured in a photograph taken in May 1914 of Emmeline being carried away by an Inspector after attempting to gain entrance to Buckingham Palace.³⁷ However, the WSPU's crusade would be abruptly halted by a far more destructive force: the Great War.

The First World War marked a profound change in the direction of the WSPU. Emmeline called for a cessation of militancy and rallied behind the war effort, pragmatically believing that 'it would be pointless to fight for the vote without a country to vote in.'³⁸ Emmeline and Christabel turned their full attention towards the war, renaming their paper *Britannia* and campaigning across Europe and America for support and enlistment. The WSPU was unique in its dedication to patriotism, as many other organizations like the NUWSS were reluctant to support the war or cease petitioning for suffrage.³⁹ Regardless, women played a vital

³³ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 173, 200.

³⁴ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 181.

³⁵ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 59.

³⁶ Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928).'

³⁷ Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 348.

³⁸ Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928).'

³⁹ Bartley, *Votes for Women*, 88-90.

role during the Great War. They joined war societies and entered en masse into the work force, which had lost two million men to the military.⁴⁰ In 1918 their efforts were rewarded with the passage of the Representation of the People Act, which granted the vote to women over the age of thirty.⁴¹

It is impossible to discern whether the enfranchisement of women over thirty was simply a response to women's contribution to the war or if it was influenced by many years of suffragist and suffragette campaigning. There was certainly a great deal of backlash against women in the workforce, as well as increasing pressure on women to return to the home.⁴² However, the war had removed many obstacles to reform by ending militancy, creating a coalition government, and allowing women to prove themselves in the workforce.⁴³ Whatever the reason, the act marked a turning point for the suffragettes. Emmeline renamed the WSPU the Women's Party and actively campaigned for the election of Christabel in the Smethwick constituency. Although Christabel lost, Emmeline continued to push for female candidates and even ran as a Conservative candidate herself.⁴⁴ However, it seemed that the passion behind the WSPU had disappeared along with the First World War, and other organizations like the NUWSS took charge.

Emmeline Pankhurst died on June 14, 1928, only weeks before the Equal Franchise Bill was passed, granting the same voting rights to women as to men. In a symbolic gesture, the royal assent to the Bill was given the day of her funeral.⁴⁵ In many ways, during her 69 years of life Emmeline was the epitome of her generation: a dedicated wife and mother and an equally

⁴⁰ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* (Hampshire, 1992), 18-21.

⁴¹ Smith, *British Women's Suffrage*, 89.

⁴² Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 223.

⁴³ Smith, *British Women's Suffrage*, 55.

⁴⁴ Purvis, 'Pankhurst, Emmeline (1858-1928).'

⁴⁵ Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, 227-9.

passionate reformer. However, she was unique in her willingness to do whatever was necessary to accomplish her goals, and her leadership inspired generations of women to follow. A new era for women was emerging. In 1919 Nancy Astor was the first of many woman to take a seat in the House of Commons.⁴⁶ A series of Education Acts during Emmeline's lifetime extended and improved education for girls, and women began attending universities in greater numbers.⁴⁷ Greater numbers of women entered the workforce, many in positions that had been barred to them just decades before. While there was still much work to be done before true equality could be achieved, the world Emmeline left in 1928 offered many more opportunities for women than it had in 1858.

⁴⁶ Barry Cunliffe (et al), *The Penguin Illustrated History of Britain and Ireland: From Earliest Times to Present Day* (London, 2001), 231.

⁴⁷ June McDermid, 'Women and Education', *Women's History*, ed. Purvis, 114-21.

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