

10 June 2013

**From Soap Boxes to Tea Sets:**

**How the Suffragette Movement got into people’s Hearts and Homes**

Antonia Byatt

Thanks very much to Gresham College for inviting me to do this talk. I used to be Director of the Women’s Library, which is the largest collection of women’s history in this country and one of the largest in the world. That collection came into being because the women who campaigned for the vote wanted a record of their campaign; they felt for too long women had been cut out of history and here was a chance to set that to rights. The collections at the Women’s Library – cared for over many years by London Guildhall University and his predecessor City of London Polytechnic where Rita Pankhurst was the Librarian – hold a wonderful museum collection of the objects used in the campaigns – many of which I will be speaking about later – as well as a fantastic collection of photographs which show women speaking and campaigning in the streets. Given that the Women’s Library is currently closed due to its move to LSE, it couldn’t be more appropriate to give this talk at the Museum of London which also has a fantastic suffrage collection.

I am completely indebted to the work of Lisa Tickner for this talk. Her research and subsequent publication *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the suffrage campaign 1907 – 14* (Chatto and Windus 1987) has informed the larger part of it.

I want to start however, in the present day. Not all of you will know that 1 July 2013 is Body Image Day. A group of 4 teenage girls from the Joseph Rowntree School in York have invented it as part of their campaign to encourage the local shops not to air brush images of girls and women to size zero, but to show women as they really are. These girls say they are reacting against advertising which ‘influences people more than they think’. Their campaign is run using social media – a website, a blog, a facebook page and twitter. It has enabled them to connect to local, national and international press and audiences who in turn have a much greater reach. They have appeared on radio 4, in the Times and they have followers in UK, Australia and Taiwan. It can snowball very quickly in our times and four very young women with belief and passion can soon start to get international recognition. I don’t use this example because I believe they have managed to change the face of advertising – though they have influenced the local stores in York and possibly helped some young women think more positively about their own bodies – but because it illustrates the tools that are available to campaigners now. It is also interesting that how women look, and what is put about as an acceptable way to look, is still a current issue for debate. What was perceived as appropriate or acceptable for women to be seen in public was a major factor for women campaigning for the vote; many chose to go out on a limb crossing all sorts of social boundaries so that they could be heard. And the way the suffrage campaigners used advertising and image was a central part to their campaigning.

Social media was not available for women in the early 20th century. No internet, no virtual social networking, no television, not even radio. The contrast with the present day would make their task seem extra-ordinarily daunting to the young women who have gathered a following by voicing their views on the internet. There was local and national press however. So what I am going to talk about today is how women campaigning for the vote got their message over and how they built support for their cause.

The 1932 Reform Act extended suffrage considerably to the middles classes – but mainly to the male middle classes and it was still the case until 1867 that only one out of five Englishmen were able to vote. Further Acts in 1867 and 1884 extended the vote to men, which meant that after that date most of the debates around suffrage were around sex as a disqualifier – whereas beforehand they had been around wealth, class, literacy and education. In 1867 John Stuart Mill moved a women’s amendment to the reform act. It was defeated but it was the early days of a campaign that was to be active for the over the next 50 years or so. In 1887 the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies was formed.

The NUWSS campaigned by bringing the issue to parliament and it was debated every year, though always defeated, even though after 1880 more than 40% of MPs backed women’s suffrage. But this did not guarantee any kind of success as the Liberal government of the time was not supportive. As a result, this kind of continuous campaigning, which brought few results became increasingly frustrating and began to spawn different points of view in the suffrage movement about what tactics might be most successful. So women turned to alternative methods of campaigning which gave much more visibility to their cause. This visibility was sometimes beautiful and spectacular and at other times it was violent and risky. The suffrage movement split in its tactics – the NUWSS continued to use constitutional campaigning but found ways to spread the reach of their message through spectacle and marketing. The WPSU and the Women’s Freedom League used more overt methods including direct action. It is a story many of you will be familiar with and it is still vastly debated which approach brought in the results. However, the material culture around the campaigns – much of which is in the Women’s Library collection as well as in the Museum of London – documents a story which spreads though all aspects of the movement, whether moderate or more radical.

In the 1880s political parties developed women’s wings and women were also able to play a role in local politics through the Municipal Franchise Act 1869. However, they had not played a role in political campaigning; not only was speaking in public a male domain but walking in the road (as opposed to on the pavement) was not deemed appropriate for a respectable women. There was centuries of etiquette around what it was not appropriate for women to do – such as going out unaccompanied or voicing their opinion in public – let alone standing on a soap box to proselytise or heckle in a crowd. But as became apparent that bills in parliament alone were not moving the campaign forward, the suffrage movement increasingly turned to public speaking. It’s probably worth clarifying at this point that the movement came to be coloured by two distinct approaches and ‘parties’. The NUWSS, led by Millicent Fawcett favoured campaigning constitutionally whilst the WSPU led by Mrs Pankhurst took a more militant approach. That is a massive over simplification but for the purposes of this talk it is worth noting that in the very early 20th century the NUWSS, founded in 1897, was the larger and more established part of the movement. The WSPU was founded in 1903 but was very small at that time. This is partly a story of how they built support on a massive scale over the next few years.

In the early 20th century the Pankhursts and other campaigners targeted wakes fairs in the north, as well as taking on campaigning during elections supporting candidates who backed female suffrage. It took considerable courage to take to a public platform. There was a huge amount of social etiquette around what it was decent for women to do which did not include voicing an opinion or going out alone in public let alone standing on a soap box. I have always felt incredible admiration for the 19th century campaigner Josephine Butler who campaigned for the rights of prostituted women who used public speaking as her main tool – a Victorian, middleclass, physically frail woman who stood on a soap box and spoke about the unattractive aspects of male sexuality! Whilst the suffrage campaigners were sometimes met with curiosity, they were also met with animosity. In his biography, (Random House 2008) *The Pankhursts*, Martin Pugh describes WSPU campaigning during the Rutland bi-election:

“Although the appearance of suffragettes in small villages was enough to bring the inhabitants running out to see them, they also attracted increasingly hostile treatment from young men. At indoor meetings youths turned up armed with handbells and cans of dried peas which they rattled noisily, or with boxes of live mice which they released in the hope of creating panic amongst the ladies present. For open air meetings the union hired wagons or lorries as platforms for its speakers. However, in the hands of a gang of youths these could be pushed around town squares and village greens and even tipped into ponds, to the consternation of the occupants and the delight of the crowds”.

On one occasion, Adele Pankhurst, who was rather slight, was knocked off her soap box. In her autobiography, *Unfinished Adventure* (Faber and Faber 2009), the Suffragette Evelyn Sharpe, describes her years of campaigning in a similar light:

“In the years to come, during which I addressed every kind of audience, indoor and outdoor, did I never lose my taste for the platform or overcome that cold feeling in the pit of my stomach which always proves the true locality of the emotions. I was not afraid of missiles, which varied from live mice to eatables – chestnuts I used to resent the most, though they may not have been intended symbolically – for at least you knew what your listeners were feeling when they threw things at you, and open warfare is always preferable to the frozen hostility of the drawing room crowd. And once, on Chorley Wood Common, where it was said that the rowdies had been hired to break up our meeting, hostility served as a means to political conversation, for by a glorious fluke I caught, without breaking, a rotten egg that was aimed at my head, and my accidental prowess secured me applause and a hearing that are rarely accorded to mere eloquence. This was in the lavish days before 1914; for the unpopular wartime orator was at least spared showers of eggs, herrings, tomatoes and other scarce and rationed foods’.

There are also descriptions of Christabel Pankhurst giving back as good as she got from male hecklers. One drunk heckler was held up by her as an example of what an inequality it was that someone as drunk as him could vote when the women could not.

Not all speeches were met with mockery and violence. The campaigners also drew admiration. Evelyn Sharpe describes disrupting a political meeting which they were consequently ejected from:

“We often met with sympathy from the crowds we addressed afterwards in the market place. It was a passer-by, a working man with his tools, who caught me as I came hurtling down the steps from a meeting at Norwich, and set me on my feet with the words ‘I admire your pluck, Ma’am’”.

Leaders of the cause became celebrity speakers and attracting followings of admiring women. Observers at the time noted the different oratory styles of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. Emmeline was a small, delicate woman and Mrs Pankhurst stuck firmly to her femininity, disapproving of any woman who wore trousers and sure to present herself always as well dressed and feminine. Later in the campaigns the Suffragettes adopted military wear and organisation – one light of the WSPU, Flora Drummond, was referred to as ‘the general’, suffragettes adopted a uniform and Mrs Pankhurst’s dress demonstrated military references. Her speaking style was emotive and engaging. In a recorded interview with Brian Harrison, Lady Ricardo recalled that the combination of her expression, the technique of a low, calm voice voiced a real passion and was a far cry from the hysteria that some people liked to associate with campaigning women. She said: ‘Her face shows the character she possesses the courage, and endurance. Her smile illuminates her clever but sad face. She speaks with a great earnestness and simplicity which arrests the attention and keeps one spellbound until she has finished.’ Christabel, on the other hand, was more of a lawyer. She employed a debating style, the style of a Victorian lay preacher, delivering her sentences in pairs in a very balanced way. But she was also known for the power of her speech and her mesmerising performances. Even reporters from hostile newspapers found themselves lost in admiration on occasion. At the Peckham by election in April 1908 the Daily Mail wrote on hearing Christabel:

“Shall I speak of her logic? It is inexorable…she has a good case and relies on it. She is saturated with facts, and the hecklers find themselves heckled, twitted, tripped, floored. I think they like it. She does, and shows it. She flings herself into the fray, and literally pants for the next question to tear to shreds’.

Being used to boldness from local politics, Sylvia Pankhurst attended a NUWSS meeting in 1905 and found it ‘all very polite and very tame; different indeed from the rousing Socialist meetings of the North to which I was accustomed’. This statement reflects the frustration at the time which was to take the campaign onto a different plane. Speaking on platforms and taking bills through parliament was not enough. It was not working. Oratory needed to be something more; deeds not words. Deeds not Words was later adopted as the WSPU slogan. As Sylvia Pankhurst put it, the goal was ‘to create an impression upon the public throughout the country, to set everyone talking about votes for women, to keep the subject in the press, to leave the government no peace from it’.

The first militant act, in October 1905, was when Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst protested at an election meeting at the Free trade Hall, disrupting the meeting by unfurling a banner. When they were arrested they refused to pay their fines and were sent to prison. This soon developed into a pattern of public heckling, disruption and arrest. It was not seen as seemly behaviour by many, from inside the suffrage campaigns as well as amongst anti-suffrage supporters. NUWSS members did not usually approve. In a letter to Mrs Fawcett, Eva Gore Booth played the class card and complained: ‘There is no class in the community who has such good reasons for objecting and does so strongly object to shrieking and throwing yourself on the floor and struggling and kicking as the average working woman, whose dignity is very real to them…our members in all parts of the country are so outraged at the idea of taking part in such proceedings that everywhere for the first time they are shrinking from public demonstrations”.

The suffrage movement needed to demonstrate public support in order to prove that its demands should be taken seriously in the face of a government who appeared to be determined not to give women the vote. Any campaigner knows that politicians are acutely aware of what they perceive the public wants - if they ignore public opinion they are unlikely to gain votes – and public opinion is a very difficult territory to work with, as Gordon Brown was all too acutely aware of in the last election, when he called one of his voters a bigot. Given that heckling and militant protest had drawn attention but was not always seen in a positive light, campaigners began to think of more ways to demonstrate public support for the movement and to spread it beyond the active few lobbying parliament and attending political meetings. The new era did not just use the power of language and oratory; it employed visual culture to spectacular effect.

The next part of my talk is looks at the marches, processions and visual culture around the movement – which provided a spectacular backdrop for its oratory and put the campaign onto a much larger scale.

**The role of artists, design and production**

Post 1905 Women artists began to play a role on both sides of the suffrage campaign – the NUWSS and the WSPU. The Artists Suffrage League was founded in 1907 and worked for the NUWSS, whilst the Suffrage Atelier led by Sylvia Pankhurst, came to life in 1909. It wasn’t just about producing wonderfully designed posters and leaflets, calling people to meetings and marking points in the campaign; the artists associations engaged the skills of artists, costume designers and regular women to create spectacle of a new order.

In a series of suffrage processions between 1907 and 1913 the suffrage campaigns used the new power of photography to a very powerful effect.

There was already a tradition of trade unions marching with great painted banners. The Artists’ Suffrage League’s Mary Lowndes embarked on a banner designing project of huge scale. (The Women’s Library holds her scrap book which contains a myriad of extraordinary designs). In Edwardian England most women were skilled at needlework and so there was already a hidden resource of women who could be called to arms. It was important too that the banners designed would be the right weight and height for women to carry, so they were smaller and embroidered rather than painted. This was cheaper too. The series of marches over these years – both NUWSS and WSPU – were carefully choreographed and staged; they were not only a show of determination but they created an atmosphere of pageant and excitement and were a contributing factor to a massive rise in membership and income enjoyed in particular by WSPU during that period.

The first march was the Mud March of 1907, so called because the 3000 women who marched from Exeter Hall to Hyde Park arrived with the bottom of their skirts soaked in mud. It was a brave and risky thing to do; marching in public was not seen as a thing women did at the time, and many of the marchers suffered catcalling and verbal insults along the way. However, it made a good story and the Manchester Guardian was impressed: ‘Nobody can suppose that most of the women who took part... can have done so for sport or for the pleasure of the thing...It requires some courage for a woman to step out of her drawing room into the street to take her place in a mixed throng for a cause probably distasteful to many or most of her acquaintance, and to see herself pilloried in the newspapers next morning by name as one of the ‘suffragettes’’ That old ladies and delicate ones, and timid ones to boot, should have done this quite simply and bravely argues at least a good deal of quiet conviction and a resolution not likely to be easily broken’ The march was careful to demonstrate the commitment to suffrage across all social classes, graduates and doctors marched alongside the factory women from the industrial north. The suffrage women artists were part of the arts and crafts movement – you can see this in the clothes they chose to wear as opposed to the stiff Victorian dresses worm by anti-suffragists – and this comes over in the design, imagery and attention to colour in how the marches were put together as well as the pre-Raphaelite references to medieval pageant.

3000 women marched in 1907, but once the barrier had been broken to undertaking such a daring act of women marching in the streets, the volume and power of the marches grew substantially over the next few years. The march of 13 June 1908 included all the suffrage organisations and it demonstrated the use of their ‘team’ colours – red while and green for the NUWSS and purple, white and green for the WSPU. Trains were booked from Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, Sheffield, Nottingham, Leicester, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds to bring women to London. Mrs Fawcett promised ‘a glorious spectacle enhanced by the gowns of doctors and graduates and ‘nearly a thousand beautiful banners and bannerettes, each different, each wrought in gorgeous colour and rich materials’. The graduate women were met off trains and given lunch. Afterwards they were sent to robing rooms as though they were part of a huge degree ceremony. The procession was two miles long. ‘a bright river flowing between the banks of the jostling crowd.’ There was an international section to the march which demonstrated support form women from other countries but also marked their contribution. The Sunday Times wrote ‘there seemed to be thousands of them, every fourth or fifth woman carrying something in the shape of an ensign.’ 10,000 to 15,000 women marched the Albert Hall, bringing inside with them their banners and their colour schemes. I have been at the Albert Hall myself at a Women’s Institute meeting, looking down from a box at a sea of pastel colour compared to a concert audience, but this must have been much more spectacular. The Daily News remarked: ‘From floor to topmost corner and furthest angle of the huge galleries, the interior was alive with women bright with colour’.

150 banners were produced between 1908 and 1913 and many of those that have survived are in the Women’s Library and Museum of London collections. The banners denoted geographical and professional affiliations as well as pay tribute to the heroines of the past, pointing out the significant roles women had played in an attempt to re-write history. Mary Lowndes, who trained as a stained glass maker, saw the banner has having many purposes. Not only did they communicate a simple message, they demonstrated different allegiances, a unity of opinion across many different sections of society and were educational in that they re-enforced the many roles and achievements of women. The banners were also effective because they looked so beautiful and arresting, and they were new and feminine. Mary Lowndes said: a banner was not just a placard but ‘a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure, to half show and half conceal a device you long to unravel: you do not want to read it, you want to worship it’

Two weeks later there was a second march – this time led by the WSPU which was to prove even more powerful in its volume and numbers. Pre-publicity was undertaken by cyclists who cycled out with leaflets to reach women outside the main metropolis. Careful attention was again given to colour – this time women wore white dresses and were adorned with the purple, white and green WSPU colours (Purple for, Green for hope, White for purity) and they were described as a flowing white snake. It is probable that over 250,000 women attended the march, many standing on platforms and speaking the public at Hyde Park. The Times was admiring of the courage of these young women, who were undaunted and made themselves heard. At 5pm a mass cheer went up for Votes for Women.

The power of these processions caught commercial eyes. Shop windows in Oxford Street were designed to show their support for the women, but commerce was also quick to manufacture white dresses, badges and other paraphernalia so that women could demonstrate solidarity for the Cause. Some items were made manufactured and sold by the women themselves. Sylvia Pankhurst famously organised the Women’s Fair in May 1909 which not only displayed banners used in marches but also sold other goods from suffrage books to postcards. There was a replica prison cell and the first soda fountain. Commercially statuettes, soap, board games and teapots hit the shops so that women could show their allegiance to the cause. From a few thousand people in late 19th century the movement moved into the centre of the high street, through people’s letter boxes and into their homes. Communications which today would be texts or e-mails were postcards stamping out the message. Images of Sylvia’s angel and sower appear everywhere and the movement used design and spectacle to re-enforce uncomfortable political messages. Women released from prison were given certificates and processed through the streets with white horses to attend celebratory dinners.

Around this time the campaign entered another stage which was to inform the makeup of the subsequent marches. Women continued to be arrested and imprisoned for militant protest – in September 1909 Gladstone ordered women on hunger strike to be forcefully fed. This not only spawned a new range of campaigning posters against force-feeding and the subsequent Cat and Mouse Act, but it also provided the theme for the From Prison to Citizenship march in January 1910. The purpose of this march was to demonstrate public support for the cause in the lead up to the election. The Women’s Freedom League urged its members ‘to show the public that ‘we are stronger and more energetic than ever before. The eyes of the whole of Great Britain will be on the militants on this occasion, and we must show that militancy has proved a success, and has drawn to the cause a great army of women from all ranks of life’. Symbolism and emotion were at their heights.

The marches certainly brought in support – subscriptions to the NUWSS and particularly to the WSPU rose substantially at this time, particularly because many upper class women became supporters. From Prison to Citizenship raised over £73,000 enabling the WSPU to employ a relatively large staff. This was an extraordinary increase from its early day subscriptions of a few thousand.

There were two more major marches – the Coronation Procession and Emily Wilding Davidson’s funeral. The Coronation Procession (17 June 1911) combined both sides of the suffrage movement, though Mary Lowndes was worried that constitutionalists didn’t have enough decorations. However, Lisa Tickner describes on the day there was ‘Joan of Arc, 700 prisoners, 126 gorgeous changing, scintillating ,iridescent colours of the banners clashing in the sun’ and many women dressed in historical costume. The symbolism used in the march constructed a new vision of women – women as leaders, members of society, professionals and heroines.

The marches continued until the last in 1913 which honoured the only martyr to the cause. Although women had gone on hunger strike none had died, but almost exactly 100 years ago, on 4 June 1913 Emily Wilding Davison went under the Kings horse at the Derby. A short film from the time shows her stepping out onto the course to unfurl her WSPU banner and as the horse gallops towards her she goes underneath it. The Women’s Library has her purse, which contains a coin and her return ticket. Her funeral was mournful and respectful but arranged in banks of colour. Women accompanied the cortege with lilies commerating the first martyr. It was the end of the marching season, but the start too of more violent militancy.

Flora Drummond had chained herself to the railings at Downing Street in 1909 – the perfect photo opportunity, but hunger strike and the withdrawal of the Franchise Bill in 1913 took the campaigning to a new level. Deeds not words became the order of the day for WSPU, which started an arson campaign aimed at property which spread to the bombing of Lloyd George’s house, the laceration of the Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery and famously digging up the wicket at Lords Cricket ground. The violence was not limited to the suffragettes however. Women protesting were persecuted and assaulted by the police; many described having their breasts mauled and their clothes ripped. It was a far cry from pageantry and show. Posters from this period also depict the violence and horror of force-feeding sending out a hard message at how women were treated who dared to ask for the franchise.

At this point it is also interesting to look at some of the anti-suffrage propaganda. There was a similar industry of posters, postcards and slogans coming from the other side. Not surprisingly they settled on the more ugly side of the campaigns and as well as re-enforcing messages that women belonged in the home and were ruining the lives of their husbands and children by protesting they also depicted the women as ugly, masculine and unfeminine. It is not surprising in this context that Mrs Pankhurst felt the need to retain her femininity or that Mary Lowndes was careful to choreograph the marches as demonstrations of beauty and persuasive emotion as well as strength of opinion.

By 1913 the effectiveness of the processions was wearing thin. The organisations were beginning to run out of new themes and the latter ones had attracted less public attention as the public had got used to the idea and also as attention was directed around more militant acts again. It was at this point that the NUWSS came up with the idea of a country wide spectacle. This time women did not stream into London on trains – leaving their jobs and families and all the problems and criticism that entailed – but the show of protest went to them by means of a nationwide pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage allowed for coverage throughout the country, but women could do it in a section, and it got the movement into small villages and rural areas. It was also a demonstration of a different method of campaigning to violence – the very term pilgrimage suggests this – and it was also an appeal once again to the power of language and oratory as the women stopped and spoke to people they encountered along the way standing on platforms in market squares and in village halls. Thousands of people came to hear them on the way – some friendly, others antagonistic. However the Common Cause, the NUWSS paper wrote: ‘but the result was nothing less than a revelation, to those who doubted it, of the almost universal sympathy given to the non-militant suffrage cause once it is understood’

However, even though 39,540 Friends of Women’s Suffrage had been enrolled along the way it was still not adequate to persuade the government. The culmination of the Pilgrimage in Hyde Park was another show of opinion, but sadly was still unable to persuade Asquith.

As most of you know the arrival of the 1914 war shortly afterwards took attention elsewhere. The vote was not won for women (and even then not all women) until after World War One. It took women’s demonstration of their economic value as workers to gain real political power for them.

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