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Modern History Sourcebook: Emmeline Pankhurst: My Own Story, 1914

1. autobiography, memoir

Emmeline Pankhurst, aided by her daughters Sylvia and Christabel, led the Women's Suffrage Movement in late 19th-century Britain. She and the "suffragettes" used confrontational tactics, and went to prison repeatedly. During World War I the movement was suspended, and in 1918, Britain became the first Western democracy to permit some women the right to vote. (Only those over 30, and with a property qualification.) Emmeline Pankhurst herself went on to stand as a Conservative candidate for Parliament!

3 Fenians

... This was in connection with the Fenian Revolt in Ireland. There was a Fenian riot, and the police arrested the leaders. These men were being taken to the jail in a prison van. On the way the van was stopped and an attempt was made to rescue the prisoners. A man fired a pistol, endeavouring to break the lock of the van door. A policeman fell, mortally wounded, and several men were arrested and were charged with murder. I distinctly remember the riot, which I did not witness, but which I heard vividly described by my older brother. I had been spending the afternoon with a young playmate, and my brother had come after tea to escort me home. As we walked through the deepening November twilight he talked excitedly of the riot, the fatal pistol shot, and the slain policeman. I could almost see the man bleeding on the ground, while the crowd swayed and groaned around him.

The rest of the story reveals one of those ghastly blunders which justice not infrequently makes. Although the shooting was done without any intent to kill, the men were tried for murder and three of them were found guilty and hanged. Their execution, which greatly excited the citizens of Manchester, was almost the last, if not the last, public execution permitted to take place in the city. At the time I was a boardingpupil in a school near Manchester, and I spent my week-ends at home. A certain Saturday afternoon stands out in my memory, as on my way home from school I passed the prison where I knew the men had been confined. I saw that a part of the prison wall had been torn away, and in the great gap that remained were evidences of a gallows recently removed. I was transfixed with horror, and over me there swept the sudden conviction that that hanging was a mistake worse, a crime. It was my awakening to one of the most terrible facts of life-that justice and judgment lie often a world apart.

I relate this incident of my formative years to illustrate the fact that the impressions of childhood often have more to do with character and future conduct than heredity or education. I tell it also to show that my development into an advocate of militancy was largely a sympathetic process. I have not personally suffered from the deprivations, the bitterness and sorrow which bring so many men and women to a realisation of social injustice. My childhood was protected by love and a comfortable home. Yet, while still a very young child, I began instinctively to feel that there was something lacking, even in my own home, some false conception of family relations,

some incomplete ideal.

This vague feeling of mine began to shape itself into conviction about the time my brothers and I were sent to school. The education of the English boy, then as now, was considered a much more serious matter than the education of the English boy's sister. My parents, especially my father, discussed the question of my brothers' education as a matter of real importance. My education and that of my sister were scarcely discussed at all. Of course we went to a carefully selected girls' school, but beyond the facts that the head mistress was a gentlewoman and that all the pupils were girls of my own class, nobody seemed concerned. A girl's education at that time seemed to have for its prime object the art of "making home attractive"-presumably to migratory male relatives. It used to puzzle me to understand why I was under such a particular obligation to make home attractive to my brothers. We were on excellent terms of friendship, but it was never suggested to them as a duty that they make home attractive to me. Why not.? Nobody seemed to know.

The answer to these puzzling questions came to me unexpectedly one night when I lay in my little bed waiting for sleep to overtake me. It was a custom of my father and mother to make the round of our bedrooms every night before going themselves to bed. When they entered my room that night I was still awake, but for some reason I chose to feign slumber. My father bent over me, shielding the candle flame with his big hand. I cannot know exactly what thought was in his mind as he gazed down at me, but I heard him say, somewhat sadly, "What a pity she wasn't born a lad."

My first hot impulse was to sit up in bed and protest that I didn't want to be a boy, but I lay still and heard my parents' footsteps pass on toward the next child's bed. I thought about my father's remark for many days afterward, but I think I never decided that I regretted my sex. However, it was made quite clear that men considered themselves superior to women, and that women apparently acquiesced in that belief.

I found this view of things difficult to reconcile with the fact that both my father and my mother were advocates of equal suffrage. I was very young when the Reform Act of 1866 was passed, but I very well remember the agitation caused by certain circumstances attending it. This Reform Act, known as the Household Franchise Bill, marked the first popular extension of the ballot in England since 1882. Under its terms, householders paying a minimum of ten pounds a year rental were given the Parliamentary vote. While it was still under discussion in the House of Commons, John Stuart Mill moved an amendment to the bill to include women householders as well as men. The amendment was defeated, but in the act as passed the word "man," instead of the usual "male person," was used. Now, under another act of Parliament it had been decided that the word "man" always included "woman" unless otherwise specifically stated. For example, in certain acts containing rate-paying clauses, the masculine noun and pronoun are used throughout, but the provisions apply to women rate-payers as well as to men. So when the Reform Bill with the word "man" in it became law many women believed that the right of suffrage had actually been bestowed upon them. A tremendous amount of discussion ensued, and the matter was finally tested by a large number of women seeking to have their names placed upon the register as voters. In my city of Manchester 8,924 women, out of a total of 4,215 possible women voters, claimed their votes and their claim was defended in the law courts by eminent lawyers, including my future husband, Dr. Pankhurst. Of course the women's claim was settled adversely in the courts, but the agitation resulted in a strengthening of the woman-suffrage agitation all over the

country.

I was too young to understand the precise nature of the affair, but I shared in the general excitement. From reading newspapers aloud to my father I had developed a genuine interest in politics, and the Reform Bill presented itself to my young intelligence as something that was going to do the most wonderful good to the country. The first election after the bill became law was naturally a memorable occasion. It is chiefly memorable to me because it was the first one in which I ever participated. My sister and I had just been presented with new winter frocks, green in colour, and made alike, after the custom of proper British families. Every girl child in those days wore a red flannel petticoat, and when we first put on our new frocks I was struck with the fact that we were wearing red and green—the colours of the Liberal party. Since our father was a Liberal, of course the Liberal party ought to carry the election, and I conceived a brilliant scheme for helping its progress. With my small sister trotting after me, I walked the better part of a mile to the nearest polling-booth. It happened to be in a rather rough factory district, but we did not notice that. Arrived there, we two children picked up our green skirts to show our scarlet petticoats, and brimful of importance, walked up and down before the assembled crowds to encourage the Liberal vote. From this eminence we were shortly snatched by outraged authority in the form of a nursery-maid. I believe we were sent to bed into the bargain, but I am not entirely clear on this point.

I was fourteen years old when I went to my first suffrage meeting. Returning from school one day, I met my mother just setting out for the meeting, and I begged her to let me go along. She consented, and without stopping to lay my books down I scampered away in my mother's wake. The speeches interested and excited me, especially the address of the great Miss Lydia Becker, who was the Susan B. Anthony of the English movement, a splendid character and a truly eloquent speaker. She was the secretary of the Manchester committee, and I had learned to admire her as the editor of the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, which came to my mother every week. I left the meeting a conscious and confirmed suffragist.

I suppose I had always been an unconscious suffragist. With my temperament and my surroundings I could scarcely have been otherwise....

2 "guerrilla warfare"

CHAPTER IV

I HAD called upon women to join me in striking at the Government through the only thing that governments are really very much concerned about—property—and the response was immediate. Within a few days the newspapers rang with the story of the attack made on letter boxes in London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, and half a dozen other cities. In some cases the boxes, when opened by postmen, mysteriously burst into flame; in others the letters were destroyed by corrosive chemicals; in still others the addresses were rendered illegible by black fluids. Altogether it was estimated that over 5,000 letters were completely destroyed and many thousands more were delayed in transit.

It was with a deep sense of their gravity that these letter-burning protests were undertaken, but we felt that something drastic must be done in order to destroy the apathy of the men of England who view with indifference the suffering of women oppressed by unjust laws. As we pointed out, letters, precious though they may be, are less precious than human bodies and souls. This fact was universally realised at the sinking of the *Titanic*. Letters and valuables disappeared forever,

but their loss was forgotten in the far more terrible loss of the multitude of human lives. And so, in order to call attention to greater crimes against human beings, our letter bumings continued.

In only a few cases were the offenders apprehended, and one of the few women arrested was a helpless cripple, a woman who could move about only in a wheeled chair. She received a sentence of eight months in the first division, and, **resolutely hunger striking, was forcibly fed with unusual brutality, the prison doctor deliberately breaking one of her teeth in order to insert a gag. In spite of her disabilities and her weakness the crippled girl persisted in her hunger strike and her resistance to prison rules, and within a short time had to be released. The excessive sentences of the other pillar box destroyers resolved themselves into very short terms because of the resistance of the prisoners, every one of whom adopted the hunger strike.**

Having shown the Government that we were in deadly earnest when we declared that **we would adopt guerrilla warfare, and also that we would not remain in prison**, we announced a truce in order that the Government might have full opportunity to fulfil their pledge in regard to a woman suffrage amendment to the Franchise Bill. We did not, for one moment, believe that Mr. Asquith would willingly keep his word. We knew that he would break it if he could, but there was a bare chance that he would not find this possible. However, our principal reason for declaring the truce was that we believed that the Prime Minister would find a way of evading his promise, and we were determined that the blame should be placed, not on militancy, but on the shoulders of the real traitor. We reviewed the history of past suffrage bills: In 1908 the bill had passed its second reading by a majority of 179; and then Mr. Asquith had refused to allow it to go on; in 1910 the Conciliation Bill passed its second reading by a majority of 110, and again Mr. Asquith blocked its progress, pledging himself that if the bill were re-introduced in 1911, in a form rendering it capable of free amendment, it would be given full facilities for becoming law; these conditions were met in 1911, and we saw how the bill, after receiving the increased majority of 167 votes, was torpedoed by the introduction of a Government manhood suffrage bill. Mr. Asquith this time had pledged himself that the bill would be so framed that a woman suffrage amendment could be added, and he further pledged that in case such an amendment was carried through its second reading, he would allow it to become a part of the bill. Just exactly how the Government would manage to wriggle out of their promise was a matter of excited speculation.

All sorts of rumours were flying about, some hinting at the resignation of the Prime Minister, some suggesting the possibility of a general election, others that the amended bill would carry with it a forced referendum on women's suffrage. It was also said that the intention of the Government was to delay the bill so long that, after it was passed in the House, it would be excluded from the benefits of the Parliament Acts, according to which a bill, delayed of passage beyond the first two years of the life of a Parliament, has no chance of being considered by the Lords. In order to become a law without the sanction of the House of Lords, a bill must pass three times through the House of Commons. The prospect of a woman suffrage bill doing that was practically nil.

To none of the rumours would Mr. Asquith give specific denial, and in fact the only positive utterance he made on the subject of the Franchise Bill was that he considered it highly improbable that the House would pass a woman suffrage amendment. In order to discourage woman suffrage sentiment in the House, Mr. Lloyd-George and Mr. Lewis Harcourt again busied themselves with spreading pessimistic prophecies of a Cabinet split in case an amendment was carried. No other threat, they well knew, would so terrorize the timid back bench Liberals, who,

in addition to their blind party loyalty, stood in fear of losing their seats in the general election which would follow such a split. Rather than risk their political jobs they would have sacrificed any principle. Of course the hint of a Cabinet split was pure buncombe, and it deceived few of the members. But it established very clearly one thing, and this was that Mr. Asquith's promise that the House should be left absolutely free to decide the suffrage issue, and that the Cabinet stood ready to bow to the decision of the House was never meant to be fulfilled.

The Franchise Bill unamended, by its very wording, specifically denied the right of any woman to vote. Sir Edward Grey moved an amendment deleting from the bill the word male, thus leaving room for a women's suffrage amendment. Two such amendments were moved, one providing for adult suffrage for men and women, and the other providing full suffrage for women householders and wife of householders. The latter postponed the voting age of women to twentyfive years, instead of the men's twenty-one. On January 24th, 1918, debate on the first of the amendments was begun. A day and a half had been allotted to consideration of Sir Edward Grey's amendment, which if carried would leave the way clear for consideration of the other two, to each of which one-third of a day was allotted.

We had arranged for huge meetings to be held every day during the debates, and on the day before they were to open we sent a deputation of working women, led by Mrs. Drummond and Miss Annie

Kenney, to interview Mr. Lloyd-George and Sir Edward Grey. We had asked Mr. Asquith to receive the deputation, but, as usual, he refused. The deputation consisted of the two leaders, four cotton mill operatives from Lancashire, four workers in sweated trades of London, two pit brow lassies, two teachers, two trained nurses, one shop assistant, one laundress, one boot and shoe worker and one domestic worker twenty in all, the exact number specified by Mr Lloyd-George. Some hundreds of working women escorted the deputation to the official residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and waited anxiously in the street to hear the result of the audience.

The result was, of course, barren. Mr. Lloyd George glibly repeated his confidence in the "great opportunity" afforded by the Franchise Bill, and Sir Edward Grey, reminding the women of the divergence of view held by the members of Cabinet on the suffrage question, assured them that their best opportunity for success lay in an amendment to the present bill. The women spoke with the greatest candour to the two ministers and questioned them sharply as to the integrity of the Prime Minister's pledge to accept the amendments, if passed. To such depth of infamy had English politics sunk that it was possible for women openly to question the plighted word of the King's chief Minister! Mrs. Drummond, who stands in awe of no human being, in plain words invited the slippery Mr. Lloyd-George to clear his own character from obloquy. In the closing words of her speech she put the whole matter clearly up to him, saying: "Now, Mr. Lloyd-George, you have doggedly stuck to your old age pensions, and the insurance act, and secured them, and what you have done for these measures you can do also for the women."

The House met on the following afternoon to debate Sir Edward Grey's permissive amendment, but no sooner had the discussion opened than a veritable bombshell was cast into the situation. Mr. Bonar Law arose and asked for a ruling on the constitutionality of a woman's suffrage amendment to the bill as framed. The Speaker, who, besides acting as the presiding officer of the House, is its official parliamentarian, replied that, in his opinion, such an amendment would make a huge difference in the bill, and that he would be obliged, at a later stage of the debates, to

consider carefully whether, if carried, any woman suffrage amendment would not so materially alter the bill that it would have to be withdrawn. In spite of this sinister pronouncement, the House continued to debate the Grey amendment, which was ably supported by Lord Hugh Cecil, Sir John Rolleston, and others.

During the intervening week-end holiday two Cabinet councils were held, and when the House met on Monday the Prime Minister called upon the Speaker for his ruling. The Speaker declared that, in his opinion, the passage of any one of the woman suffrage amendments would so alter the scope of the Franchise Bill as practically to create a new bill, because the measure, as it was framed, did not have for its main object the bestowal of the franchise on a hitherto excluded class. Had it been so framed a woman suffrage amendment would have been entirely proper. But the main object of the bill was to alter the qualification, or the basis of registration for a Parliamentary vote. It would increase the male electorate, but only as an indirect result of the changed qualifications. An amendment to the bill removing the sex barrier from the election laws was not, in the Speaker's opinion, a proper one.

The Prime Minister then announced the intentions of the Cabinet, which were to withdraw the Franchise Bill and to refrain from introducing, during that session, a plural voting bill. Mr. Asquith blandly admitted that his pledge in regard to women's suffrage had been rendered incapable of fulfilment, and he said that he felt constrained to give a new pledge to take its place. There were only two that could be given. The first was that the Government should bring in a bill to enfranchise women, and this the Government would not do. The second was that the Government agree to give full facilities as to time, during the next session of Parliament, to a private member's bill, so drafted as to be capable of free amendment. This was the course that the Government had decided to adopt. Mr. Asquith had the effrontery to say in conclusion that he thought that the House would agree that he had striven and had succeeded in giving effect, both in letter and in spirit, to every undertaking which the Government had given.

4 Liberals

Two members only, Mr. Henderson and Mr. Keir Hardie had the courage to stand up on the floor of the House and denounce the Government's treachery, for treachery it unquestionably was. **Mr. Asquith had pledged his sacred honour to introduce a bill that would be capable of an amendment to include women's suffrage, and he had framed a bill that could not be so amended.** Whether he had done the thing deliberately, with the plain intention of selling out the women, or whether ignorance of Parliamentary rules accounted for the failure of the bill was immaterial. The bill need not have been drawn in ignorance. The fount of wisdom represented by Mr. Speaker could have been consulted at the time the bill was under construction quite as easily as when it had reached the debating stage. Our paper said editorially, representing and perfectly expressing our member's views: "Either the Government are so ignorant of Parliamentary procedure that they are unfit to occupy any position of responsibility, or else they are scoundrels of the worst kind."

I am inclined to think that the verdict of posterity will lean towards the later conclusion. If Mr. Asquith had been a man of honour he would have re-framed the Franchise Bill in such a way that it could have included a suffrage amendment, or else he would have made amends for his stupendous blunder-if it was a blunder-by introducing a Government measure for women's suffrage. He did neither, but disposed of th(matter by promising facilities for a private member' bill which he knew, and which everybody knew, could not possibly pass.

There was no chance for a private member's bill even with facilities, because of a number of reasons but principally because the torpedoing of the Conciliation Bill had destroyed utterly the spirit of conciliation in which Conservatives, Liberals and Radicals in the House of Commons, and militant and non-militant women throughout the Kingdom had set aside their differences of opinion and agreed to come together on a compromise measure. When the second Conciliation Bill, of 1911, was under discussion, Lord Lytton had said: "If this bill does not go through, the woman suffrage movement will not be stopped, but the spirit of conciliation of which this bill is an expression will be destroyed, and there will be war throughout the country, raging, tearing, fierce, bitter strife, though nobody wants it."

Lord Lytton's words were prophetic. At this last brazen piece of trickery on the part of the Government the country blazed with bitter wrath, All the suffrage societies united in calling for a Government measure for women's suffrage to be introduced without delay. The idle promise of facilities for a private member's bill was rejected with contumely and scorn. The Liberal women's executive committee met, and a strong effort was made to pass a resolution threatening the withdrawal from party work of the entire federation, but this failed and the executive merely passed a feeble resolution of regret.

The membership of the Women's Liberal Federation was, at that time, close to 200,000, and if the executive had passed the strong resolution, refusing to do any more work for the party until a Government measure had been introduced, the Government would have been forced to yield. They could not have faced the country without the support of the women. But these women, many of them, were wives of men in the service, the paid service of the Liberal Party. Many of them were wives of Liberal members. They lacked the courage, or the intelligence, or the insight, to declare war as a body on the Government. **A large number of women, and also many men, did resign from the Liberal Party, but the defections were not serious enough to affect the Government.**

The militants declared, and proceeded instantly to carry out, unrelenting warfare. We announced that either we must have a Government measure, or a Cabinet split--those men in the Cabinet calling themselves suffragists going out--or we would take up the sword again, never to lay it down until the enfranchisement of the women of England was won.

It was at this time, February, 1913, less than two years ago as I write these words, that militancy, as it is now generally understood by the public began--militancy in the sense of continued, destructive, guerilla warfare against the Government through injury to private property. Some property had been destroyed before this time, but the attacks were sporadic, and were meant to be in the nature of a warning as to what might become a settled policy. Now we indeed lighted the torch, and we did it with the absolute conviction that no other course was open to us. We had tried every other measure, as I am sure that I have demonstrated to my readers, and our years of work and suffering and sacrifice had taught us that the Government would not yield to right and justice, what the majority of members of the House of Commons admitted was right and justice, but that the Government would, as other governments invariably do, yield to expediency. Now our task was to show the Government that it was expedient to yield to the women's just demands. In order to do that we had to make England and every department of English life insecure and unsafe. We had to make English law a failure and the courts farce comedy theatres; we had to discredit the Government and Parliament in the eyes of the world; we had to spoil English sports, hurt business, destroy valuable property, demoralise the world of society, shame the churches,

upset the whole orderly conduct of life-

That is, we had to do as much of this guerilla warfare as the people of England would tolerate. When they came to the point of saying to the Government: "Stop this, in the only way it can be stopped, by giving the women of England representation," then we should extinguish our torch.

Americans, of all people, ought to see the logic of our reasoning. There is one piece of American oratory, beloved of schoolboys, which has often been quoted from militant platforms. In a speech now included among the classics of the English language your great statesman, Patrick Henry, summed up the causes that led to the American Revolution. He said: 'Ve have petitioned, we have remonstrated, we have supplicated, we have prostrated ourselves at the foot of the throne, and it has all been in vain. We must fight-I repeat it, sir, we must fight.'

Patrick Henry, remember, was advocating killing people, as well as destroying private property, as the proper means of securing the political freedom of men. The Suffragettes have not done that, and they never will. In fact the moving spirit of militancy is deep and abiding reverence for human life. In the latter course of our agitation I have been called upon to discuss our policies with many eminent men, politicians, literary men, barristers, scientists, clergymen. One of the last named, a high dignitary of the Church of England, told me that while he was a convinced suffragist, he found it impossible to justify our doing wrong that right might follow. I said to him: 'Ye are not doing wrong-we are doing right in our use of revolutionary methods against private property. It is our work to restore thereby true values, to emphasise the value of human rights against property rights. You are well aware, sir, that property has assumed a value in the eyes of men, and the eyes of the law, that it ought never to claim. It is placed above all human values. The lives and health and happiness, and even the virtue of women and children-that is to say, the race itself-are being ruthlessly sacrificed to the god of property every day of the world.'

To this my reverend friend agreed, and I said: "If we women are wrong in destroying private property in order that human values may be restored, then I say, in all reverence, that it was wrong for the Founder of Christianity to destroy private property, as He did when He lashed the money changers out of the Temple and when He drove the Gaderene swine into the sea."

2 "guerrilla warfare"

It was absolutely in this spirit that our women went forth to war. In the first month of guerilla warfare an enormous amount of property was damaged and destroyed. On January 31st a number of putting greens were burned with acids; on February 7th and 8th telegraph and telephone wires were cut in several places and for some hours all communication between London and Glasgow were suspended; a few days later windows in various of London's smartest clubs were broken, and the orchid houses at Kew were wrecked and many valuable blooms destroyed by cold. The jewel room at the Tower of London was invaded and a showcase broken. The residence of H. R. H. Prince Christian and Lambeth Palace, seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury, were visited and had windows broken. The refreshment house in Regents Park was burned to the ground on February 12th and on February 18th a country house which was being built at Walton-on-the-Hill for Mr. Lloyd-George was partially destroyed, a bomb having been exploded in the early morning before the arrival of the workmen....

Source:

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