“MY PART IN A CHANGING WORLD”: WOMEN’S

STRUGGLE FOR THE VOTE AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT

This essay is concerned with some 20 autobiographies by participants in the women’s suffrage movement with differing backgrounds and beliefs. Their writings reveal similarities and differences between autobiographical subjects. The author addresses the importance that some autobiographers attached to pain, the problems attendant on its representation, and their determination to make women’s pain count politically. The autobiographical accounts of Helena Swanwick, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Edith Picton-Turbevill and other suffragists are contrasted to the suffragette autobiographies of Emmeline Pankhurst and her supporters, with their emphasis on law-breaking, imprisonment and patriotic support for the war effort. The struggle for the vote was the apogee of some women’s lives, while for others a mere stepping stone; their life achievements lay elsewhere—in the peace movement, the theatre, social reform, music, religion, the police service or journalism. However, the autobiographical subjects look back on the excitement of the suffrage struggles as life-changing—the crucible in which their subsequent political understanding was shaped. In paying critical attention to the writings of militant and non-militant, Christian and secularist, socialist and fascist alike, the author shows how these autobiographies create a variegated, complex and diverse picture of the “cause”, its fault lines and its supporters.

This essay is concerned with some 20 autobiographies written by participants in the women’s suffrage movement.1 I examine the autobiographical writing of women of differing social backgrounds and political persuasions in relation to some feminist theoretical accounts of autobiography which help to illuminate both the usefulness of the genre to supporters of the movement and why this has been a genre of writing historically important to women. I also explore some of the objectives and priorities of different activists, the tensions which arose from them in the Edwardian and post-Edwardian suffrage movement, and how those tensions inform their later autobiographies.

As is customary, I use the word “suffragist” to describe supporters of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), founded in 1897,

and others who worked for the vote by constitutional means. The word “suffragette” is used to denote supporters of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), started in 1903, the Women’s Freedom League, formed in 1907, and others who resorted to militant action.2 However, many varieties of suffragism were to be found across the country. Women altered their loyalties and started and joined new local and regional groups. Some organizations were set up nationally to bring together those with shared professional, occupational, political or religious interests. This was the case for the Women Writers’ Suffrage League, of which one of my autobiographical subjects, Cicely Hamilton, was a member, and the Church League for Women’s Suffrage, to which another, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, belonged.

While the rights of men to tell their own life stories have historically been uncontentious, women’s attempts to do likewise have been fraught with difficulty. Concluding her memoir, published alongside her biography of her deceased husband in 1656, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle asks: “Why hath this lady writ her own life?” Anticipating a question that could have been addressed to anyone having the temerity to write her own autobiography in a society in which the personal life of a woman was regarded as being of lesser consequence than that of a man, she responds thus:

[…] tis no purpose to the readers, but it is to the authoress because I write for my own sake, not theirs; neither did I intend this piece for to delight, but to divulge; not to please the fancy, but to tell the truth.3

By 1935, it appears that little had changed in this respect. The suffragist Helena Swanwick, a pioneering journalist with the Manchester Guardian and a British representative at the League of Nations, still felt the need to preface her autobiography with fulsome praise for her late husband and this modest disclaimer of any public significance of her own: “To write, nay more, to offer for publication, a whole book strung on the thread of one’s own personality seems an outburst of egotism requiring apology”.4 An alternative reading of Swanwick’s words, however, is that they are an attempt to dissociate herself from the romantic heroism of the autobiographies of some militant suffragettes which celebrate the “willful acts of heroic individuals bent on making themselves forces of change”.5

Propelled from obscurity to the limelight by the struggle with which their names are inextricably linked, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Christabel, Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst were, and indeed still are, well known; Helena Swanwick was somewhat less so. All their autobiographies fulfil the “classic” criterion of what constitutes a good autobiography: that this should demonstrate and illuminate the subject’s links to the times in which they live. Yet the conflation of male subjectivity and human identity remained so strong that Margaret Cavendish’s question (“Why hath this lady writ her own life?”) resonates across autobiographies published several centuries later. As Sidonie Smith puts it: “From their position of marginality, women have spoken. They have written public autobiography. Nonetheless, when they engage in the autobiographical project, they did so as interlopers”.6

These autobiographical writings about suffrage are remarkable in their range and diversity, and cannot without the grossest distortion be assimilated to any common grid. They indicate similarities between women as well as significant differences. I return later to some of these key differences: the importance that some autobiographies (but not others) attached to pain, the problems attendant on its representation, and the determination of some autobiographers to make women’s pain count politically. There are also differences of emphasis on continuity with the nineteenth-century struggles and on change, as in the WSPU’s innovative and disruptive strategy and tactics. Participation in the struggle was the apogee of some women’s lives, while for others it was merely a stepping stone; their major life achievements lay elsewhere or were still to come in, for example, the peace movement, the theatre, social reform, music, religion, the police service or journalism. However, virtually without exception, the autobiographical subjects look back on the excitement of having worked for the vote as life-changing and acknowledge themselves as beneficiaries of, as well as participants in, the struggle.

Their writings pay tribute to the suffrage struggle as the crucible in which their political understanding was shaped. “The education I received as a political agitator was enhanced a hundredfold by the fact that I received it from Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett, my leader”, wrote the preacher Maude Royden, who edited the NUWSS journal the Common Cause.7 Royden obtained her “suffrage education” working with the poor at the Victoria Women’s Settlement in Liverpool, and is remembered today for her pioneering work for the ordination of women in the Church of England.

As I have argued elsewhere, suffragette autobiography is largely a misnomer insofar as militancy lasted some 10 years, was suspended in 1914 and could hardly constitute the raison d’être of any woman’s entire adult life.8 The suffragette narrative, in which the emotional and physical trauma of imprisonment and forcible feeding is related by women who lived through these ordeals (including Lady Constance Lytton, Emily Wilding Davison, and Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst), is deeply embedded in the public consciousness. Indeed, it is widely recognized as representing the ultimate in women’s commitment, courage, idealism and capacity for personal sacrifice for a higher cause.9

Yet, as Laura Mayhall has shown, what can be loosely termed the “suffragette trauma narrative” is largely a retrospective construction consolidated during the 1920s and 1930s, and owing much to the activities of the former suffragettes who set up the Suffragette Fellowship for the purpose of memorializing the bravery of the militants and ensuring that their version of the historical record should never be forgotten.10 This is, however, but one of a number of competing and contested narratives relating to women’s struggle for the vote available to women at the time and to historians in later years. The autobiographical accounts of the public dimensions of the suffrage movement and its impact on the personal lives of women such as Helena Swanwick, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Edith Picton-Turbevill, who did not believe it right to break the law and had no first-hand experiences of prison, position them outside the dominant narrative of women’s enfranchisement. This is associated primarily with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and their emphasis on the need for militancy, law-breaking, imprisonment and patriotic support for the war effort between 1914 and 1918. It is by looking at these autobiographies collectively, paying attention to the words of militant and non-militant, avid Christian and secularist, socialist and fascist alike, that I hope to show how they can help us to form a more variegated, complex and diverse picture of the “cause”, its fault lines and its supporters than has hitherto been recognized.

As Leigh Gilmore suggests, the authority of autobiography “is derived through autobiography’s proximity to the rhetoric of truth telling: the confession”,11 judicial and spiritual—that is, the autobiographical subject telling a “truth” which can be externally verified, the disclosure of which is important both to her identity and subjectivity and to the textual production of the autobiographical self. Yet autobiographical inscription is by its nature self-justificatory. The memory, as James Olney notes, “goes backward so that narrative, its twin and counterpart, may go forward: memory and narration move along the same line only in reverse directions”.12 Thus, the suffrage autobiographers frequently punctuate their narratives with reflections on criticisms of their actions of which they were unaware at the time of the events they narrate. They do this to justify their past behaviour to future generations with no memory of the world without the hard-won freedoms their actions helped to bring about. Autobiographical writing by women attempts to put straight the historical record, but the disclosure of public facts is inseparable from the private subjectivities of the narratorial “I”. Autobiography is a genre in which the self is authorized, but, because the narration of a life can never be restricted to a solitary isolated subject, it is also and always far more than a self-authorizing genre.

The relationship between the individual and organized suffragism was symbiotic: the development of an individual political consciousness predicated on the development of women’s collective political consciousness, and vice versa. As Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield put it, the “narration of a self cannot be understood in isolation from another it acknowledges, implicitly or explicitly, and with which it is in a constitutive relationship”, and such “others” are “an integral part of consciousness, events and the production of a narrative”.13 The autobiographies show how the shared experience of militant action engendered lifelong personal friendships, sisterhood and solidarity: “You have a different feeling all your life about the women with whom you eluded the police sleuth and went forth to break windows in Whitehall, or to be mobbed in Parliament Square, or ejected from a Cabinet Minister’s meeting”, noted the journalist Evelyn Sharp.14 “There is a cord between Christabel and me that nothing can break—the cord of love. Distance or absence makes no difference. We started Militancy side by side and we stood together until Victory was won”, wrote Lancashire textile worker Annie Kenney.15

The autobiographical subject’s sense of identification with a wider community (the women’s suffrage movement) and with what Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck refer to as “singularity in alternity”—the representation of the self in relation to others—is essential to the informed understanding of their personal narratives.16 Yet the idea of community that permeates the life writings is problematic—exclusionary as well as inclusive. Women chose to shift their allegiances from one community to another, to change the communities they joined, and to alter their relationship to those they left behind.

It is worth pausing to consider some of the fissions and tensions that inform the autobiographies. As Millicent Garrett Fawcett explained:

[…] the general mass of suffragists throughout the country were loyal to the cause by whomsoever it was represented, just as Italian patriots in the great days of the Risorgimento supported the unity of Italy, whether promoted by Cavour, Garibaldi or Mazzini.17

However, the autobiographers reveal differences of principle which were deeply held and often irreconcilable. The WSPU was founded in Manchester in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, a member of the Independent Labour Party from 1893–1903, and of the NUWSS. The first major split within the WSPU occurred in 1907 when disaffected members, asking for a constitution, the devolution of powers to local groups and democratic accountability within the organization, voted to form the Women’s Freedom League; they carried with them approximately 20% of the WSPU membership.18 Many of the rebels were socialists who wanted the WSPU to be closer to the labour movement. Prominent members of the League included Charlotte Despard, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Teresa Billington-Greig, Edith How-Martyn, Dora Marsden, Helena Normanton and Anne Cobden Sanderson.

Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and her husband Frederick were ousted from the WSPU by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in 1912 when it became clear that men were no longer welcome in the organization and that criticism of extreme militant tactics would not be tolerated. Evelyn Sharp left in solidarity with the Pethick-Lawrences and the three joined the United Suffragists. This group, which was open to men and to non-militants, was started in 1914 in response to the acceleration of suffragette violence and disaffection with the separatist policies of the WSPU leadership. The radical suffragists, in the main Lancashire textile operatives and the East London Federation of Suffragettes led by Sylvia Pankhurst, retained their commitment to socialist politics and fought for the rights of working women and their children, as well as the vote. Finally, the largest of the societies, the NUWSS, was subject to an existential crisis of massive proportions, to which I return, over the question of women’s support for the 1914–18 war. This split the society into diametrically opposed pacifist and non-pacifist camps, and led to some important feminist peace initiatives in which Sharp, Helena Swanwick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence were prominent.

In practice, “[r]ank-and-file suffragists were often either oblivious of, or indifferent to, the divisions among the national leadership, or between that leadership and the leadership of the labour movement”.19 Many belonged to more than one suffrage organization, including Sylvia Pankhurst, Evelyn Sharp, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Hannah Mitchell, Maud Arncliffe Sennett, Mary Gawthorpe, Dora Montefiore, Cicely Hamilton, Charlotte Despard and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. In Life Errant (1935), Cicely Hamilton, who wrote the lyrics of the suffrage anthem “The March of the Women”, explains:

For a few months I was a member of the Women’s Social and Political Union; then, for somewhat longer, of the Women’s Freedom League; but I was happier working with less political bodies, such as the Women Writers’ Suffrage League, of which I was one of the founders.20

Dora Montefiore was active in socialist circles and a WSPU executive member. Her autobiography, From a Victorian to a Modern (1927), provides a vivid account of the renowned “Siege of Hammersmith” in 1906 when she withheld her taxes and barricaded herself into her house to await the bailiffs, surrounded by fervent supporters. Montefiore became Honorary Secretary of the Adult Suffrage Society at the request of its President, the shopworkers’ leader Margaret Bondfield. The move reflected her disenchantment with suffragette violence—“I could not reconcile myself to seeing the young girls resisting, with physical force, the police”.21 It also reflected the strength of her socialist convictions, as the WSPU moved further away from its labour movement origins, and her commitment to the enfranchisement of working men.

The foundation of the WSPU amounted to a shift in the tectonic plates in the history of suffragism in the United Kingdom, dramatically moving the vote to the heart of the political agenda from the peripheries and challenging not only the Liberal government but also the deeply rooted assumptions and ways of working of the constitutionalist suffragists. In order to understand the strength of feeling—the cumulative anger, hope, disappointment and frustration that underpinned suffragette activity—it should be remembered that half a century of lobbying for the vote by an indefatigable band of Victorian and Edwardian constitutional suffragists had proved largely to no avail. Only 2 of the 18 bills that were put before the House (in 1875 and 1886), in the period between John Stuart Mill’s amendment to the Reform Bill of 1867 and the start of suffragette militancy, passed a second reading. The rest were all defeated, obstructed or thrown out, in what Margaret Wynne Nevinson aptly summarized in Life’s Fitful Fever (1926) as a “wonderful record of women’s patience and men’s shame”.22

However, the methods of the NUWSS, led by the veteran Millicent Garrett Fawcett since 1897, were courteous, ladylike and restrained—so much so that Maud Arncliffe Sennett, a West End actor active in the Actresses’ Franchise League who performed under the stage name of Mary Kingsley, professed herself to be unaware of its existence in her autobiography, The Child (1938): “For it is a dead certainty that though I had been all my life, longing for the upliftment of my sex, I knew nothing of this older society”.23 Indeed, when militancy erupted, Sennett was forcibly struck by the contrast between the two sections:

The militant women look so much younger, progressive and with so much more life in them, though younger they were not. And looking at these groups, I seem to see why Mrs Fawcett’s party had been on the road for so many years and almost needed the inspiration of Christabel Pankhurst and her young followers to put life into the movement.24

Of course, not all women who wanted to take part in militant actions were in a position to do so. Evelyn Sharp was constrained from breaking the law by a promise from which she was released after five years in 1911 by a letter from her mother. Jane Sharp conceded that: “I have no right to thwart you, much as I should regret feeling that you were undergoing those terrible hardships”.25 The author Violet Hunt would

[…] certainly have done my three months in the terrible second division if it had not been for the provisions I made for the care, delegated to me, of an invalid mother and a young niece. Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel kindly dispensed with my services in extremis.26

Annie Barnes “had commitments at home looking after all my brothers and sisters. I couldn’t chance imprisonment”. But she “did volunteer for other things that were less risky”.27 Her first mission with the East London Federation of Suffragettes was to throw leaflets over London from the top of the Monument.

The suffrage campaigns bifurcated women’s lives into a modern “after” and a Victorian and Edwardian “before”. Mary Sophia Allen, who became a high ranking woman police officer, recollects the shock of leaving home after her father’s ultimatum to “give up this Suffragette nonsense absolutely and for good—or you leave this house!”28 Other autobiographical subjects railed against domestic and marital ideologies which put obstacles in the way of their creativity, personal fulfilment and intellectual endeavour. Helena Swanwick was at loggerheads with her mother: “I had felt and resented the assumption that, whereas education was of importance for my brothers it was of no account for me”, she writes in I Have Been Young (1935). She adds:

A boy might be a person, but not a girl. This was the ineradicable root of our differences. All my brothers had rights as persons; not I. Till I married (at the age of 24) she never, in her heart, conceded me personal rights.29

The arguments against marriage that Cicely Hamilton had articulated in her feminist treatise Marriage as a Trade (1909) are reiterated in her autobiography. She explains that “what I rebelled at chiefly was the dependence implied in the idea of ‘destined’ marriage, ‘destined’ motherhood—the identification of success with marriage, of failure with spinsterhood, the artificial concentration of the hopes of girlhood on sexual attraction and maternity”.30

The women’s suffrage movement was a cultural, social and political network in which feminist ideas were hegemonic, and which provided supporters with education, resources, sisterhood and support. As Liz Stanley explains: “feminism constitutes an ontology, a different way of being in the world which is rooted in the facts of oppression”.31 The movement acted as a magnet for women who had experienced discrimination professionally and in their personal lives, and who were often just as interested in the feminist transformation of society which the vote symbolized as in the vote itself: “My personal revolt was feminist rather than suffragist”, writes Hamilton.32

Maude Royden explained that

[…] to work for the enfranchisement of women was a tremendous experience, a tremendous education […] The struggle both absorbed and widened my life. It gave me a sympathy—and I believe an understanding which linked me to all disfranchised persons and nations.33

Participation in the campaigns brought action, excitement, lustre and agency to sheltered lives hitherto starved of meaning and purpose. Annie Barnes recalls: “Being in the suffragettes did a lot for me. I couldn’t say ‘Boo’ to a goose before that”.34 Writer after writer values the movement because it validated the intensity of feeling that she had experienced, perhaps for the first time in her life. In This Was My World (1933), Margaret, Lady Rhondda wrote:

[…] for many other young women like me, militant suffrage was the very salt of life. The knowledge of it had come like a draught of fresh air into our padded, stilted lives […] It made us feel that we were part of life, not just outside watching it. It made us feel that we had a real purpose and use apart from having children.35

As Kathryn Dodd suggests, the suffragette autobiographers created a new “public identity” in which the “personal” became “re-defined” and “transformed by public life”.36 Titles such as This Was My World, My Part in a Changing World (1938) and From a Victorian to a Modern linked the individual to the collective and the personal journey described to wider societal changes in the position of women. The autobiographies evoke the repressiveness of women’s lives in Edwardian and Victorian Britain, in which restrictive hemlines and chaperones for unmarried women were de rigueur. Lady Rhondda recalls:

[…] it required an almost unbelievable effort of will before a woman brought up with all the inhibitions of the decent Victorian “lady” could bring herself to throw stones through a street window. The women who did it broke more than windows with their stones; they broke the crust and conventions of a whole era.37

Margaret Wynne Nevinson, a clergyman’s daughter, had begun her adult life as a “decent Victorian ‘Lady’” and struggled to overcome her inhibitions before making her debut as a public speaker outside some gasworks in south London in 1906: “At first I refused to speak at street corners and in the open; I could not overcome my Victorian prejudices; it seemed such a vulgar thing to do”.38 In Life’s Fitful Fever Nevinson describes an outdoor meeting at Waterloo as a “nightmare of horror” with a “volley of rotten tomatoes, cabbage stalks and decayed fruit”.39 But indoor meetings were also fraught with dangers. The water hose was turned on at a meeting of the Women’s Freedom League at Sutton in 1907, where “wild pandemonium reigned; rats were let loose amongst the audience”.40 Violet Hunt recollects her discomfiture on rattling a collecting tin with May Sinclair, another member of the Women Writers’ Suffrage League:

Much has been said about our heroism in “standing outside to beg”, and I fancy she felt as I did—as if we had suddenly been stripped naked, with a cross-sensation of being drowned in a tank and gasping for breath.41

Not all autobiographers shared the privileged middle-class upbringings of Nevinson, Hunt and Sinclair. Mary Gawthorpe, Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell and Molly Murphy remind us of the origins of the women’s suffrage movement in the labour movement, and of its deep working-class roots in the north of England. Their autobiographies evoke the richness of a forgotten culture of Sunday schools, churches, choirs, discussion groups, cooperative societies, Clarion cycling clubs and self-help groups set up by socialists and political radicals to bring culture, enlightenment and enjoyment of outdoor activities to working-class lives governed by unrelenting poverty and toil. Molly Murphy (neé Morris), a WSPU organizer in Sheffield, had joined the Manchester WSPU at 16 years of age through her mother, an ardent co-operator and diligent reader of the Clarion newspaper. She recollects that the “first two years of the WSPU were spent mainly in propaganda in Labour Party branches, Clarion clubs, trade union branches, open air meetings, during the ‘wakes’ in the cotton towns”.42

Gawthorpe, Kenney and Mitchell tell how they were politicized in a flourishing network of socialist choirs, Sunday schools, Clarion clubs, trade union and Independent Labour Party branches, etc., which transported working class women like themselves out of the home and gave them a political education and new organizational skills. “The Labour Movement, it now seemed to me, was in aim and method all I had hitherto known as practical Christianity. I took to the new ethics like a duck to water”, wrote Gawthorpe, a school teacher and Independent Labour Party and National Union of Teachers activist in Leeds, who was appointed as a WSPU organizer in Manchester after she met Christabel Pankhurst, and was a “demure young lady of exactly 24 who spoke at the Sunday night meeting of the Labour Church”.43

One of 12 children, Annie Kenney had worked full-time in a cotton mill in Oldham from the age of 13 before becoming a WSPU organizer. “The changed life into which most of us entered was a revolution in itself”, wrote Kenney in Memories of a Militant (1924):

No home-life, no one to say what we should do or what we should not do, no family ties, we were free and alone in a great brilliant city, scores of young women scarcely out of their teens met together in a revolutionary movement, outlaws or breakers of laws, independent of everything and everybody, fearless and self-confident.44

Hannah Mitchell, later to become a magistrate and member of Manchester City Council, was also appointed as a WSPU organizer. Mitchell struggled to support herself as a seamstress while her husband insisted she fulfil the domestic duties he still expected. In consequence, she suffered exhaustion and a minor nervous breakdown, writing in The Hard Way Up (1977), published posthumously by her grandson, that “no cause was ever won between dinner and tea, and those of us who were married had to fight with one hand tied behind us”.45

While some autobiographical subjects were motivated by socialist principles, others recall the deep religious convictions that underpinned their activism. References to conversion, suffering and martyrdom permeated suffrage discourse. Lady Constance Lytton and Emily Wilding Davison were “martyrs”, and Saint Joan was the “patron saint” of the movement. Indeed, NUWSS supporters on the Women’s Pilgrimage in 1913 followed the traditional routes taken by medieval pilgrims. “For—let there be no mistake about it—this movement was not primarily political; it was social, moral, psychological and profoundly religious”, explained Swanwick.46

Lesley Parker Hume notes that the members of the executive committee of the NUWSS were generally middle-aged, mostly middle class, and Evangelical or Nonconformist in religion, with a high proportion of Quakers among them.47 Charlotte Despard, President of the Women’s Freedom League, converted to Roman Catholicism out of respect for the religion of the working class Irish Catholic community in Battersea among whom she lived. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence describes how her lifelong commitment to the poor began as a voluntary worker in the West London Mission of the Methodist Church, and wrote of her conversion to the “gospel of socialism as it was preached in our day by Keir Hardie in the political field, and by Edward Carpenter as a philosopher and a poet”.48 In A Life’s Work (1949), Margaret Bondfield, the first woman to achieve cabinet rank as Minister of Labour in Ramsay MacDonald’s government (1929–31), tells how the Christian activism of her family helped her own political formation—one brother was an officer in the Salvation Army, another a missionary in China, and her sister became a Wesleyan deaconess.49

The early campaigns of the women’s suffragette movement bore a striking resemblance to the religious revivalist movements of late Victorian Britain. Emmeline Pankhurst writes: “We adopted Salvation Army Methods and went out into the highways and the byways after Converts”; she adds: “Just as the Booths and their followers took religion to the street crowds in such fashion that church people were horrified, so we took suffrage to the general public in a manner that amazed and scandalized the other suffragists”.50

The autobiographers draw freely on the rhetoric and language of Christianity and the Bible: “Roughness we certainly met with. Ours was not a popular cause and at many a meeting we risked life and limb; like St Paul, ‘we fought with beasts at Ephesus’”, remarks Margaret Wynne Nevinson, a member of the Church League for Women’s Suffrage.51 Edith Picton-Turbevill, a missionary in India until ill-health compelled her return to England, was Vice President of the Young Women’s Christian Association and its Director of Appeals. She preached in public and campaigned for women to enter the ministry before being elected Labour Member of Parliament for the Wrekin in Shropshire (1929–31). In Life Is Good (1939), Picton-Turbevill recalls her one meeting with Emmeline Pankhurst in 1912, the purpose of which was to urge her to abandon her militant methods. She “quoted the Bible which Mrs Pankhurst also did and quite as effectively. Looking back I think it was something of an impertinence on my part”.52

What differentiated the suffragettes, in the main, from the constitutional suffragists was their first-hand experience of imprisonment. The suffragette arson campaign and attacks on commercial and private property also generated deep divisions between suffragettes. The Roll of Honour of suffrage prisoners lists some thousand persons (overwhelmingly female) estimated to have gone to prison between the start of militant activity in 1905 until its suspension on the outbreak of the First World War.53 Suffragette prisoners constituted the largest contingent of women ever to have been sent to prison for reasons related to political principle on the British mainland. The precise number of those who went on hunger strike and/or were subjected to forcible feeding while in custody is unknown.

In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Elaine Scarry reflects on how physical pain, in contrast to other states of consciousness, is resistant to objectification in language. Such pain is for “the individual experiencing it overwhelmingly present, more emphatically real than any other human experience, and yet is almost invisible to anyone else, unfelt and unknown”.54 The Body in Pain explores how political regimes have inflicted pain as an instrument in breaking down or “unmaking” the sufferer’s sense of self. In The Cultural Politics of Emotion Sarah Ahmed contends that the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s body creates the desire to “know what it feels like”. Ahmed terms the latter the “sociality of pain.”

If forcible feeding—a procedure widely denounced at the time because women were forced to undergo it without proper nutritional or medical justification—is an attempt on the part of the authorities to “unmake” a resistant ego and to remake this into a more pliant (and compliant) one, the suffragette autobiography is a “reverse discourse”. It is the written testimony of a survivor —the discursive attempt to textually refashion the sufferer’s sense of self. Suffragette autobiographies do contain first- and third-person accounts of forcible feeding. Christabel Pankhurst’s Unshackled (1958), published posthumously from a manuscript found by Grace Roe, describes the forcible feeding of Mary Richardson, Grace Roe and Nellie Hall.55

However, the autobiographical subjects do not linger on their own pain, precisely because, as Scarry points out, this is inexpressible. Instead they dwell on the daily tedium, humiliation and iniquities of prison life that made the words “suffragette” and “prison reformer” virtually interchangeable. Annie Kenney reflects that “[t]he people of the future will look with the same horror on these buildings as we look on the dungeons and the black pits of the middle ages”, and concludes: “Prison is a peculiar place to live in […] The imagination must be very vivid to get away from its deadening, soul-destroying atmosphere. It is a death-trap to aspiration and inspiration”.56

What emerges from the militant autobiographies is the determination that bodily suffering should not be forgotten and that women’s pain should be made to count politically. Mary Sophia Allen is initially reticent to describe her own forcible feeding, but does so “to show these modern young women who sneer at ‘The suffragette Frumps’ something of what we suffered so that they might have their much-vaunted political freedom”.57 Other middle-class women who witnessed women’s suffering, as Poor Law guardians or social reformers among the urban poor, often attribute their own conversion to the “cause” to such experiences and see women’s suffering in prison as part of the same continuum.

In My Own Story (1914), Emmeline Pankhurst recollects being “horrified to see little girls seven and eight years old on their knees scrubbing the cold stones of the long corridors” of the Chorlton workhouse where heavily pregnant women were “doing the hardest kind of work, almost until their babies came into the world […] These poor, unprotected mothers and their babies I am sure were potent factors in my education as a militant”.58 Later, when “Holloway became a place of horror and torment”, Pankhurst was appalled at the “sickening scenes” of violence during the “disgusting and cruel process of forcible feeding […] I shall never while I live forget the suffering I experienced during the days when those cries were ringing in my ears”.59

Tactics such as arson, window-breaking and destroying churches and works of art caused deep internal divisions in the movement. However, while suffragette prisoners were being subjected to disproportionate, if not draconian, sentences for relatively inconsequential public order offences, they enjoyed some degree of public sympathy. Criticism of suffragette violence was often suspended voluntarily (or muted) in suffrage circles as a measure of respect for the women suffering in prison. Sylvia Pankhurst, who had been imprisoned and force-fed many times, explained her own position in her autobiography published in 1931, long after the vote was won and constraints on criticism of the militants no longer operated: “I would not advocate secret militancy. I would take no part in it, but repudiation I would leave to others”.60

Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s feelings on violence were unequivocal. In What I Remember (1924), she writes: “To put the whole matter in a sentence, we were convinced that our job was to win the hearts and minds of our countrymen to the justice of our cause, and this could never be done by force and violence”.61 Yet Fawcett refused to be drawn into condemnation of individual acts of violence, consistently pointing to the iniquities of the prison sentences and what women shared in common rather than their differences in her public utterances, and acting with what Maude Royden recollects as “complete reasonableness and a quiet spirit”.62

Helena Swanwick, a lifelong pacifist, is an exception to the rule. Driven by her commitment to freedom of expression and the “wholesomeness of criticism”, Swanwick resigned as editor of the Common Cause because “the things I wanted to say about W.S.P.U were such as apparently the N.U would not tolerate in its organ”.63 Swanwick was forthright in her condemnation: “I have never been able to see that it does the cause of women’s suffrage any good to refrain from criticizing militant suffragists who, in my opinion, are doing considerable immediate and far more considerable ultimate harm”.64

In learning how to counter anti-suffragist “physical force” arguments (only those able to defend their country by bearing arms [men] should be entitled to vote), women had developed alternative notions of citizenship based on peace, non-violence and cooperation. Many saw support for war in any form as a violation of fundamental suffragist and democratic principles. Thus, what Fawcett terms in What I Remember as her call to all suffragists to “aid our country to the utmost by devising and carrying out well-thought out plans of national usefulness” proved anathema to many of her supporters and led to a sizeable number of resignations from the NUWSS.65

The autobiographies of Helena Swanwick, Evelyn Sharp and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence are richly informative about a little-known aspect of suffrage history: the principled opposition of sizeable sections of the movement to militarism. They also tell us much about what June Purvis describes as the “maternal, imperial feminism” of Emmeline Pankhurst that “gave high priority to women’s role in raising the moral tone of the nation and

Empire”.66 Women’s peace initiatives included the campaigns for a negotiated end to the First World War and to establish the League of Nations as an international peacekeeping organization. Swanwick and Sharp were prevented by the government from attending the Women’s Peace Conference at The Hague in 1915. Pethick-Lawrence was one of only three British women who attended, having entered the Netherlands with the United States delegation. Sharp joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, set up to link feminism and the peace movement; Swanwick became Chairman and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence Treasurer of the British section. In Unfinished Adventure (1933), Sharp tells of how she kept the suffrage cause alive “lest, when the time came for dealing with franchise reforms, as it inevitably must come after such a war, the woman’s claims should be as usual ignored”.67 Withholding her taxes, she was declared bankrupt and her property was sent to auction: “no ostracism I ever suffered in the militant years was comparable to the misery of being in the minority during the four years of the war”.68

Autobiographical subjects frequently use the techniques of the novelist— dramatic incident, suspense, foreshadowing, figurative language, character development, etc.—as well as the linear, chronological plot to engage their readers’ interest. While the autobiographer purports to tell the life story of a “real” person, the distinction between autobiographical writing and fiction is not clear-cut. Indeed, Virginia Woolf wrote that:

[…] of all literature (yes, I think this is more or less true) I love autobiography most. In fact, I sometimes think only autobiography is literature—novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me.69

Yet for all the arguments about autobiography as a literary genre, its specificity as a discursive medium is inseparable from its truth claims. However, the problem of looking to autobiography for the “truth” is that human memory is unreliable and autobiographical disclosure selective; autobiographical subjects almost invariably wish to present themselves in the best possible light. The relationship between the autobiographer and her reader is therefore “crucial to the process of ‘composure’ by which a narrator produces a story of themselves with which they can live in relative psychic comfort”.70

All the autobiographers are partial in what they choose to reveal. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, for instance, inexplicably says nothing about the birth of her beloved daughter, Philippa. Sylvia Pankhurst omits any reference to her long love affair with the married Keir Hardie from her autobiography in order to safeguard her privacy. Emmeline Pankhurst’s My Own Story mentions perfunctorily Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who was very important in the early days of the WSPU, and key workers such as Mary Gawthorpe and Dora Montefiore, who subsequently left or were expelled from the WSPU, are omitted. The truth claims of Mary Richardson’s Laugh a Defiance (1953) are dubious.71 As Hilda Kean points out, Richardson, a militant who achieved some notoriety for slashing the Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery in 1913, situates her personal narrative in the context of the Edwardian suffragette movement, which she deemed acceptable to her first readers, deliberately omitting any mention of her more recent involvement as head of the Women’s Section of the British Union of Fascists, which was not.72 The autobiography also forwards the fictitious claim that Richardson was present at the Derby at Emily Wilding’s death; no external corroboration exists, and her presence is not mentioned in either the suffragette or national press coverage. Emphasizing Richardson’s unreliability as a narrator, Elizabeth Crawford suggests that she has exaggerated her own importance and her account is not chronologically accurate: “rather she presents a series of incidents, in each of which she takes a starring role. I have little doubt that the purpose of Laugh a Defiance was to raise funds”.73

Winifred Holtby, aged 16 when militancy was suspended in 1914 and too young to have been fully involved, provides this memorable description of its long-term significance:

It had disproved those ideas about their own nature which were—and sometimes are—among their gravest handicaps. This was the great value of militancy. It broke down hitherto infrangible tabus […] The very recklessness and extremism of militancy had shaken old certainties. An emotional earthquake had shattered the intangible yet suffocating prison of decorum.74

Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence makes much the same point: the militant struggle had produced a “change in the character no less than in the status of women”, destroying the “maiming subserviency” that “had for ages held the spirit of the mass of women in thrall”, not only for “women actively engaged in the struggle, but for the millions who from afar looked on with critical amazement”.75

As we have seen, participants in the suffrage campaigns frequently felt that their lives had been radically transformed for the better. But this was often at the cost of damage to their mental and physical health, marital breakdown, severance from family and friends, and deferment or loss of job prospects. In Female Pipings in Eden (1933), the composer Ethel Smyth recollects “countless poor women of the working class, nurses, typists, shop girls, and the like, who had good reason to doubt whether their employers would ever take them back again in Holloway Prison”.76 The suffrage autobiographers were aware of a younger generation of women who knew little of recent history and regarded the suffrage campaigns as passé. Their memoirs acknowledge the danger of the vote being divorced from the struggle which had made it possible and the personal sacrifices this struggle had entailed.77

Leigh Gilmore suggests that “even in the narrowest and most ambivalent sense, writing an autobiography can be a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for”.78 Because women’s lives have been misrepresented, erased or marginalized within patriarchal societies, autobiographical inscription, which privileges individual subjectivity, is one way of writing women back into the historical record—of changing women from the objects to the subjects of discourse. As Linda Anderson puts it:

[…] the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself in re-writing stories that already exist about her […] She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces difference.79

The personal voice that speaks beyond itself in these life writings helps the historian not only to reconstitute women’s lives at a pivotal moment of historical change, but also to reconfigure the social, cultural and political dimensions of those lives. Women’s engagement in public politics therefore comes to be seen not as an atypical or aberrant activity, but on a continuum, as an extension of women’s workaday lives. Because the vast majority of women had to renegotiate personal, workplace and domestic relationships before, alongside and after their work for women’s suffrage, Sandra Stanley Holton suggests that the autobiographies intimate the

[…] need to rethink the present organisation of British women’s history in this period, an organisation which tends to treat the history of women’s involvement with formal politics as a largely separate and discrete area of study from, say, the history of sexuality and reproduction, or of domestic life.80

After the war, many suffragists and suffragettes joined feminist organizations such as the Six Point Group, started by Lady Rhondda in 1921, or enjoyed new opportunities for women which were made possible by the acquisition of the vote. The autobiographers acknowledge the “singularity in alternity” of their own achievements—their indebtedness to the women who went before them.81 Like many veterans, Edith Picton-Turbevill was present at both the unveiling of the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst by Stanley Baldwin in Victoria Tower Gardens in 1930 and the dedication of the medallion in Westminster Abbey in memory of Millicent Garrett Fawcett in 1932. “On one point I do feel confident”, she writes: “I would never have had the interesting and absorbing experience of being a Member of Parliament had it not been for the work of these two gallant women”.82

# Notes

1. These are written by Annie Barnes, Margaret Bondfield, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Mary Gawthorpe, Cicely Hamilton, Violet Hunt, Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell, Dora Montefiore, Molly Murphy, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Christabel, Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Edith Picton-Turbevill, Mary Richardson, Maude Royden, Maud Arncliffe Sennett, Evelyn Sharp, Ethel Smyth, Helena Swanwick and Margaret Haig Thomas.
2. Note that the Women’s Freedom League did not condone arson or damage to property.
3. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, “Memoirs of Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle”, Life of the First Duke of Newcastle and Other Writing (1656; London: Dent, 1915), pp. 187–213 (213).
4. Helena Swanwick, I Have Been Young (London: Gollancz, 1935), p. 15.
5. Sandra Stanley Holton, “The Making of Suffrage History”, Votes for Women, ed. June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 13–33 (21).
6. Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), p. 48.
7. Maude Royden, “A. Maude Royden”, Myself When Young, ed. Margaret Oxford (London: Muller, 1938), pp. 361–82 (381).
8. Maroula Joannou, “‘Who Would Be Politically Free Herself Must Strike the Blow’: Suffragette Autobiography and Suffragette Militancy”, The Uses of Autobiography, ed. Julia Swindells (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 31–44

(31).

1. For an analysis of the autobiographies of Christabel, Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst which refutes the notion that My Own Story was “ghostwritten” and addresses the sibling relationships between Sylvia and Christabel, see Maureen Wright and June Purvis, “Writing Suffragette History: The Contending Autobiographical Narratives of the Pankhursts”, Women’s History Review, 14.3–4 (2005): 405–33.
2. Laura E. Nym Mayhall, “Creating the ‘Suffragette Spirit’: British Feminism and the Historical Imagination”, Women’s History Review, 4.3 (1995): 319–44.
3. Leigh Gilmore, Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994), p. 109.
4. James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature”, Callaloo, 20 (1984): 46–73 (47).
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6. Evelyn Sharp, Unfinished Adventure: Selected Reminiscences from an Englishwomen’s Life (London: John Lane, 1934), p. 136.
7. Annie Kenney, Memories of a Militant (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 289.
8. Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck, eds., Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988), p. 11.
9. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Women’s Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1912), pp. 61–62.
10. Andrew Rosen, Rise Up Women: The Militant Campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union 1903–1914 (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 92.
11. Sandra Stanley Holton, Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women’s Suffrage Movement (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 35.
12. Cicely Hamilton, Life Errant (London: Dent, 1935), p. 66.
13. Dora Montefiore, From a Victorian to a Modern (London: E. Archer, 1927), p. 108.
14. Margaret Wynne Nevinson, Life’s Fitful Fever: A Volume of Memories (London:

A. and C. Black, 1926), p. 192.

1. Maud Arncliffe Sennett, The Child: The Writer’s Experience of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement, 1906–18 (London: C. W. Daniels, 1938), p. 58.
2. Sennett, p. 58.
3. “Letter from Jane Sharp to Evelyn Sharp”, n.d.; qtd. in Angela John, Evelyn Sharp, Rebel Woman, 1869–1955 (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), p. 65. The reference to the second division is to the category below that of political prisoner, which had more privileges. Suffragettes lobbied to be recognized as political prisoners who were in the first division.
4. Violet Hunt, The Flurried Years (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1926), p. 42.
5. Annie Barnes, Tough Annie: From Suffragette to Stepney Councillor (London: Stepney Books, 1980), p. 15.
6. Mary S. Allen, Lady in Blue (London: Stanley Paul, 1936), p. 14.
7. Swanwick, pp. 81, 138.
8. Hamilton, p. 65.
9. Liz Stanley, The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/ biography (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992), p. 252.
10. Hamilton, p. 65.
11. Royden, p. 381.
12. Barnes, p. 18.
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14. Kathryn Dodd, introduction, A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader, ed. Dodd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993), p. 15.
15. Rhondda, p. 162.
16. Nevinson, p. 212. 39. Nevinson, p. 213.
17. Nevinson, p. 212.
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20. Mary Gawthorpe, Up Hill to Holloway (Penobscote, ME: Traversity, 1962), pp. 173, 180.
21. Kenney, p. 110.
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1. Swanwick, p.187
2. Lesley Parker Hume, The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, 1897– 1914 (New York: Garland, 1982), p. 12.
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5. Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story (London: Everleigh Nash, 1914), p. 62.
6. Nevinson, p. 212.
7. Edith Picton-Turbevill, Life Is Good: An Autobiography (London: Morgan and Scott, 1939), p. 110.
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9. Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, ed., Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote, by Christabel Pankhurst (London: Hutchinson, 1958), p. 285.
10. Sarah Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (London Routledge, 2004),p.29, p.28.
11. Kenney, p. 97.
12. Allen, p. 21.
13. E. Pankhurst, pp. 25, 28.
14. E. Pankhurst, pp. 251, 252.
15. Sylvia Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals (London: Longman, 1931), p. 402.
16. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, What I Remember (London: Fisher Unwin, 1924), p. 192.
17. Royden, p. 382.
18. Swanwick, pp. 231, 223.
19. Swanwick, p. 231.
20. Fawcett, What, p. 219.
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23. Sharp, p. 161.
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27. Hilda Kean, “Some Problems of Constructing and Reconstructing a Suffragette’s Life: Mary Richardson, Suffragette, Socialist and Fascist”, Women’s History Review, 7.4 (1998): 475–93 (476).
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30. Pethick-Lawrence, My Part, p. 239.
31. Ethel Smyth, Female Pipings in Eden (London: Peter Davies, 1934), p. 211.
32. See Hilda Kean, “Searching for the Past in Present Defeat: The Construction of Historical and Political Identity in British Feminism in the 1920s and 1930s”, Women’s History Review, 3.1 (1994): 57–80 (60).
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34. Linda Anderson, “At the Threshold of the Self”, Women’s Writing: A Challenge to Theory, ed. Moira Monteith (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 54–71 (59).
35. Sandra Stanley Holton, “The Suffragist and the ‘Average Woman’”, Women’s History Review, 1.1 (1992): 9–24 (10).
36. Brodski and Schenck, p. 11.
37. Picton-Turbevill, pp. 111–12.

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