DEEDS NOT WORDS

EMMELINE PANKHURST
LEADER OF THE M.I.L.I.T.A.N.T SUFFRAGETTES

June Purvis offers a fresh look at the career of the suffragette leader.

Emmeline Pankhurst is remembered as the heroine of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU or the Union), the most notorious of the groups campaigning for the parliamentary vote for women on equal terms with men in Edwardian Britain. She founded the WSPU in 1903 as a women-only organisation and under her leadership the deeds of her followers grabbed the imagination of the public.

The popularity of the suffragette movement was evident when Midge Mackenzie’s television series, Shoulder to Shoulder, was shown in 1974. Twenty-five years later, Emmeline Pankhurst topped the polls among Observer and Daily Mirror readers as the woman of the twentieth century. However, most historians have presented her in a negative manner.

The most influential account of the votes for women campaign, The Suffragette Movement (1931) was written by Sylvia Pankhurst, the middle of Emmeline’s three daughters, from whom she was estranged at the time of her death in 1928. Sylvia had often been at odds with the views of her mother and Christabel, her elder sister and the organising secretary of the WSPU – and their mother’s favourite child. Writing not just as an angry socialist but also as a rejected daughter, Sylvia presented her mother as a traitor to the socialist cause, a failed leader and a failed mother, easily swayed by Christabel. Both

‘Those men and women are fortunate who are born at a time when a great struggle for human freedom is in progress.’ The opening sentence of My Own Story, by Emmeline Pankhurst (1914).

Emmeline and Christabel were represented as moving further and further to the political right.

The Suffragette Movement has become the accepted account of Emmeline Pankhurst, especially after George Dangerfield adapted this script in The Strange Death of Liberal England, first published in 1935 and reprinted at least up until 1972. Dangerfield belittled the suffragette movement, labelling it as a ‘brutal comedy’, a ‘puppet show’ where the strings were pulled by Emmeline and Christabel. Both women were seen as opportunists, seeking to rise above their impecunious middle-class background in Manchester, and as despots who ‘dictated every move, and swayed every heart, of a growing army of intoxicated women.’

More recent group biographies of the Pankhurst women have not deviated significantly from this path. David Mitchell’s The Fighting Pankhurs (1967) attempted to assess the careers and achievements, before and after suffrage, not only of Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia but also of Adela, the least known, youngest daughter. But he diminished the ‘posse of Pankhurs’, as he terms them, who circled ‘the great, recalcitrant herd with their little lassos of hope and conviction.’ Martin Pugh’s The Pankhurs (2001) also presents Emmeline as an opportunist who sought to marry ‘an important man’ so that she could be upwardly mobile, a bad mother as well as a misguided and weak leader of the WSPU since she constantly deferred to Christabel. Emmeline’s feminist stand is attributed to a character defect. For Pugh, Sylvia, the feminine socialist feminist who cried easily, was the heroine of the family, just
A WSPU meeting in 1906: early suffragettes, including, left to right seated, Flora Drummond, Christabel, Jessie Kenney, Nellie Martel, Emmeline, and Charlotte Despard.

as she presented herself in The Suffragette Movement.

What historians have rarely mentioned is that the picture Sylvia drew of her mother in The Suffragette Movement often contradicted claims in her earlier book of 1911, The Suffragette, and statements in her 1935 biography, The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst. My reading of Emmeline Pankhurst suggests that there is a more complex story to be told.

Born in 1858 into a middle-class family in Manchester, Emmeline Goulden married Dr. Richard Pankhurst, a radical barrister twenty-one years her senior, in 1879. Their marriage was both a love match and a political partnership. Abandoning her membership of the Women’s Liberal Federation in disappointment over the attitude of the Liberal Party towards women’s suffrage, Emmeline and Richard became keen members of the newly formed (1893) Independent Labour Party (ILP). A popular figure and vigorous campaigner, Emmeline was elected to the National Executive of the ILP in 1897. When Richard died the following year, Emmeline temporarily lost interest in politics.

Left with heavy debts and four children to bring up, she gave up her philanthropic work as a Poor Law Guardian and took a paid job as a Registrar of Births and Deaths in a working-class area of Manchester. The plight of the poor women she encountered stirred her. Emmeline became convinced that the only way to raise women out of their subordinate position was to campaign for the citizenship birthright of the parliamentary vote, though the ILP emphasised class rather than gender issues. When she heard that the socialist hall to be opened in her husband’s name would not admit
women, Emmeline declared that she had wasted her time in the ILP. On October 10th, 1903, she invited some socialist women to her Manchester home to found an independent women’s movement. The permanent motto of the WSPU was decreed: ‘Deeds, not words’.

During the early years, the small group engaged in a range of constitutional and peaceful work. However, convinced that such methods would not bring the desired result, Christabel decided on a more confrontational approach. On October 15th, 1905, on the eve of a general election, Christabel and Annie Kenney, a working-class recruit to the Union, interrupted a Liberal Party meeting in Manchester by asking ‘Will the Liberal Government, if returned, give votes to women?’ The question, unanswered, was repeated by the women who were then swiftly ejected from the hall, charged with obstruction and sentenced to pay fines or face imprisonment. Emmeline offered to pay the fines, but Christabel refused.

Emmeline’s faith in Christabel’s political instinct was confirmed when the protest attracted newspaper coverage, bringing more converts to the cause. However, Sylvia’s claim, in The Suffragette Movement, that from the day of Christabel’s first imprisonment their mother proclaimed her eldest daughter to be ‘her leader’, must be treated with caution. Christabel always repudiated this and a number of contemporaries commented that Emmeline’s daughters always deferred to their mother. It is often difficult to untangle who made policy decisions, but the trust between Emmeline, the inspirational leader of the WSPU, and Christabel, its key strategist, was absolute and never broken.

Emmeline identified herself with Christabel’s new militant tactics. An impassioned speaker, her radical words seemed incongruent with her appearance as a middle-class, law-abiding widow and mother. Many who knew her remarked on the contradictions within her personality. She could be gentle and fiery, kind and ruthless, courageous and afraid.

Emmeline and Christabel decided that London would be a more fertile ground for the campaign. Since neither was free to move to the capital, Annie Kenney was sent, in January 1906, to plan a procession to Parliament for February 19th, the day of the King’s Speech. On that day, Emmeline addressed a group of WSPU members or ‘suffragettes’, as they were now called. When she heard that votes for women had not been mentioned in the speech, she announced that the women must march to the House of Commons, to argue their case. This was the first of many such deputations.

Later that month, on the recommendation of Keir Hardie, a social
worker Emmeline Pethick Lawrence became Honorary Treasurer of the Union. Together with her lawyer husband Frederick, Pethick Lawrence brought administrative, commercial and publicity skills to the growing organisation, as well as considerable wealth and social contacts.

Two months later, convinced that Keir Hardie’s Commons resolution in favour of the enfranchisement of women would be talked out, Emmeline travelled to London. On April 25th, the small group of women sat in the Ladies Gallery, watching proceedings through a grille. When an anti-suffragist MP began to do as Emmeline predicted, she gave a signal to her followers who shouted out, ‘We refuse to have our Bill talked out’ and pushed flags through the grille. MPs, including Hardie, were angered by this breach of decorum as the police ejected the women. Outside they met a hostile reception from ILP supporters who believed the women’s antics had wrecked the chances of the bill. The Liberal prime minister, Campbell-Bannerman, meanwhile, could only preach the virtue of ‘patience’ while also declaring himself in favour of votes for women. Emmeline remained a member of the ILP throughout 1906, but with increasing difficulty since she also insisted that, for WSPU members, the immediate enfranchisement of women must take precedence over all other questions, including those of class.

On February 13th, 1907, Emmeline presided over the first of many Women’s Parliaments to mark the opening of the new men’s Parliament the previous day. Learning that votes for women had again been omitted from the King’s Speech, a deputation hastened to the Commons. Fifty-four women were arrested.

Criticisms now began to surface within the Union over the by-election policy of not only opposing all government parliamentary candidates but also maintaining independence from the other parties, including the Labour Party. Though Sylvia and Adela privately disagreed, Emmeline and Christabel insisted the anti-government policy was the only way to force the government to bring in a women’s bill, while independence was the only way to unite women of all political persuasions to the common cause. Both women therefore resigned from the ILP during the summer of 1907.

These issues, together with unease about an autocratic style of leadership, led some WSPU members to plan a coup against the leadership to take place at the annual conference planned for October. The Pethick Lawrences pleaded with Emmeline to exercise her authority, which she did. Declaring the constitution of the WSPU abolished, Emmeline cancelled the conference and invited members to support her, which the majority did. The disaffected members, including Teresa Billington and Charlotte Despard, formed another militant organisation, later called the Women’s Freedom League. Emmeline offered no apology for the autocratic structure of the WSPU at central level. As she emphasised in her autobiography (published in 1914), the WSPU was not hampered by complex rules but was simply ‘a suffrage army in the field. It is purely a volunteer army, and no one is obliged to remain in it.’ As Rebecca West commented in 1933, in her battle for democracy Emmeline was obliged, lest that battle be lost, to become a dictator.

However, in the years immediately following the 1907 split, Emmeline chose not to exercise direct control. She was consulted on major policy issues but day-to-day control of the Union lay in the hands of Christabel and the Pethick Lawrences with whom Christabel lived, while Emmeline travelled continuously, leading the by-election policy.

On February 13th, 1908, Emmeline was arrested and charged with obstruction while leading a deputation to Parliament. Refusing to be bound over, she and eight other women were sentenced to six weeks, her first term of imprisonment. Emmeline’s flair for the dramatic was demonstrated on her release on March 19th. That night she made an unexpected appearance at a WSPU meeting at the Royal Albert Hall. She waited in the wings until the other speakers were seated and then walked quietly onto the stage, removed the placard saying ‘Mrs Pankhurst’s Chair’ and sat down to great applause.

Herbert Asquith, a notorious anti-suffragist, became prime minister in spring 1908. He refused to give facilities for a women’s suffrage bill even though it had passed its second read-
Annie Kenney, one of the original group from Manchester, is arrested in 1913.

ing the public to help the WSPU 'To Rush the House of Commons'. On trial at Bow Street in October with Christabel and Flora Drummond, Emmeline cited her experiences as a working mother and as a Poor Law Guardian, which had taught her about the unjust marriage and divorce laws that deprived women of maintenance for their children and gave them no legal right of guardianship: 'We are here not because we are law-breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers'.

When, in late September 1909, the government introduced forcible feeding as a response to the hunger striking of imprisoned suffragettes who wished to be treated as political offenders, Emmeline was outraged. 'The spirit which is in woman today', she warned, 'cannot be quenched; it is stronger than all earthly potentates and powers, than all tyranny, cruelty and oppression'.

Emmeline embarked on a tour of North America in October 1909, to earn money for the treatment of her youngest child, Harry, who had contracted poliomyelitis. 'I am what you call a hooligan,' she announced to the delighted audience at New York’s Carnegie Hall. But Harry died early in 1910, whereupon the broken-hearted Emmeline threw herself into her work; another general election had been called.

The Liberals were again returned, but with no overall majority. Realising that this situation could benefit the women’s cause, H.W. Brailsford, a journalist, set up a Conciliation Committee for Women’s Suffrage among MPs across the political spectrum. Though doubtful, Emmeline offered her support and declared a truce on militant tactics. Except for one week in November 1910, militancy remained suspended until November 1911.

In that month Emmeline was back in the USA where she heard that

Emmeline Pankhurst (standing) and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence leave Bow Street in style on April 3rd, 1912. They were shortly convicted of conspiracy and sent to prison once more.
Asquith had announced that a Manhood Suffrage Bill would be introduced at the next parliamentary session, which would allow amendment for the enfranchisement of women. She knew such a measure was doomed to failure and would destroy the all-party majority for the Conciliation Committee. She cabled back ‘Protest imperative!’ to Christabel, who was already organising a deputation for November 21st.

As this deputation marched to Parliament, a smaller group of women, armed with bags of stones and hammers, broke windows in government buildings. The truce had ended. Emmeline returned to England in January 1912, the words ‘women’s revolution’ on her lips.

The following month Emmeline declared that the weapon and argument to be used at the next demonstration was the stone. This was supported by Christabel and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence: ‘Why should women go to Parliament Square and be battered about and insulted, and most important of all, produce less effect than when they throw stones?’ On March 1st, Emmeline, with two others, broke windows at 10 Downing Street, while 150 other suffragettes smashed shop windows in London’s West End. The WSPU had previously announced its militant demonstrations in advance but this attack was mounted without warning. Emmeline was sentenced to two months’ imprisonment. After two more days of window-smashing, the police swooped on WSPU headquarters to arrest the other leaders but found only the Pethick Lawrences.

Christabel escaped to France from where she now attempted to lead the movement.

In May Emmeline stood trial, with the Pethick Lawrences, on charges of ‘conspiracy’. She made another poignant speech in which she explained how women had been driven to militancy by the stubborn opposition of the government. The defendants were nevertheless sentenced to imprisonment; Emmeline Pankhurst and Frederick Pethick Lawrence were also ordered to pay the prosecution costs. Back in prison, Emmeline and the other WSPU prisoners went on hunger strike. Forcible feeding began, but Emmeline resisted the prison authorities’ attempt to inflict this on her.

The Pethick Lawrences did not favour a move towards more aggressive militancy. Also, the costs of the conspiracy trial had not been paid, and as Emmeline, who had given up her Manchester home in 1907, had no assets, Fred’s country home was occupied by bailiffs. Emmeline had never liked Fred, and now came to the conclusion that the Pethick Lawrences had become a liability to the Union: the government could strip them of their fortune, thus creating sympathy among their suffragette supporters and putting pressure on the WSPU to curb the scale of militancy. Fred had also begun to push himself to the fore on WSPU platforms even though, as a man, he could not be a member of the Union. When the Pethick Lawrences returned to WSPU headquarters in early October, Emmeline told them their connection with the Union was severed. The shocked couple could not believe that Christabel, whom they regarded as a daughter, was party to the decision and insisted that she come to London. She did so, and confirmed that she was united with her mother on the issue.

The ousting of the Pethick Lawrences revealed just how ruthless and uncompromising Emmeline and Christabel could be. With the
Pethick Lawrances out of the way, Emmeline could now be a more visible and dominant figure in central London. She now took on the responsibility for raising funds. At the Royal Albert Hall meeting on October 17th, 1912, she carried the audience with her as she outlined the new militant policy which was to include relentless opposition to the political parties, as well as attacks on public and private property, but never on human life. 'Be militant each in your own way', she cried. 'I incite this meeting to rebellion.'

In January 1913, after Asquith dropped the Manhood Suffrage Bill for that session, Emmeline declared war on the government, saying that suffragettes would do as much damage to property as they could if that was the necessary way to win the vote. Over the next eighteen months the WSPU engaged in large-scale window smashing, set fire to pillboxes, raised false fire alarms, engaged in the arson and bombing of empty buildings, attacked works of art, cut telegraph and telephone wires, and damaged golf courses. Now regarded as a dangerous subversive, Emmeline was watched by plain-clothes detectives. On April 2nd, 1913, she was sentenced to three years' penal servitude, though she served less than six weeks of her sentence between the time of her conviction and the suspension of militancy. Through the Prisoners’ Temporary Discharge for Ill-health Act, known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’, which allowed prisoners with ill health to be released on a licence in order to recover so that they would be fit enough to be re-admitted, Emmeline was repeatedly in and out of prison. In the autumn of 1913, while still under sentence, she made another trip to the US where she was detained at Ellis Island as an undesirable alien, a ruling overturned by President Wilson himself.

Later she travelled to Paris where she spent January 1914, asking Sylvia and Adela to join her. Sylvia now experienced the humiliation of being told by Christabel, with Emmeline’s support, that her East London Federation must become separate from the WSPU since, contrary to Union policy, it was allied with socialist and trade union associations. Although the decision troubled Emmeline, she could not make an exception for a member of her own family. The restless Adela, a socialist, whom Emmeline believed wanted to come into the movement as Christabel’s rival, was shattered to hear that her mother considered her a failure. Dejected, she decided not to argue against Emmeline’s well-meaning plan for a new start in life in Australia. As with Sylvia, the price to be paid for any suspected challenge to Christabel’s role in the WSPU, and to the policy she and Emmeline had agreed, was expulsion.

On May 21st Emmeline led her last deputation, this time resorting to the right to petition the monarch. As she was being arrested her, she shouted defiantly, ‘That’s right! Arrest me at the gates of the Palace. Tell the King!’

Released on a temporary discharge from Holloway, she managed to escape to France. In August 1914, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, the government released

Early in March 1912 a widespread window-smashing campaign began in London. Here the broken windows of Swan & Edgar’s department store in Piccadilly are replaced.
all persons imprisoned for suffrage agitation, and on August 12th, Emmeline sent a letter to all WSPU members announcing a temporary suspension of activities. The militant campaign had ended.

Emmeline was horrified when Germany invaded France, and asked WSPU members to support Britain’s war effort. She became a patriotic feminist, arguing that it would be pointless to fight for the vote without a country to vote in. In 1917, she visited Russia, as a war emissary for the British government, to plead with Kerensky, the head of the Provisional Government, not to agree to a premature peace. Her observations on life under the Bolsheviks intensified her dislike of international Marxism and its advocacy of class conflict.

It was now clear that women would soon get the vote. In preparation for the event, the WSPU was renamed the Women’s Party in November 1917. In February the following year, women over the age of thirty were finally given the vote if they were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5 or more, or graduates of British universities. Keen that Christabel should be the first woman MP, Emmeline campaigned enthusiastically for her candidacy, on a Women’s Party ticket, in the December general election, and was bitterly disappointed when her daughter lost.

After living in Canada and on the French Riviera, Emmeline returned to England just before Christmas 1925 to find a society embroiled in class conflict and industrial disputes. Impressed with the way Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative prime minister, handled the General Strike, Emmeline decided to stand as a parliamentary candidate for the Conservative Party, a position she felt would enable her to work for reforms for women and children.

She decided to live in her prospectively constituency to improve her slim chances of election. But a family secret was being kept from her: Sylvia, cohabiting with an Italian socialist and anarchist, had given birth to a son the previous December. The first hint of this surfaced when Emmeline was warned that a heckler at one of her campaigning meetings would question her about the morals of her daughter. Emmeline dealt with the question politely, but she was devastated. The News of the World, in April 1928, then ran an article by Sylvia about the joys of motherhood and her rejection by her own mother, bringing Emmeline further distress. Mother and daughter were never reconciled.

Illness and financial anxiety followed and on June 14th, 1928, a month before her seventieth birthday, Emmeline died. The bill that would give women voting rights over the age of twenty-one on equal terms with men became law less than a month later on July 2nd.

The souring of Emmeline’s relationship with Sylvia during the last year of Emmeline’s life undoubtedly helped to shape the way the daughter represented the WSPU leader in The Suffragette Movement. But it was more than that. That Emmeline had resigned from the ILP in 1907, was a patriot during the First World War, and had campaigned as a Conservative parliamentary candidate in the last year of her life, was anathema to Sylvia. And it has been so for influential socialist historians ever since, especially socialist feminist historians. By the late twentieth century, Emmeline Pankhurst was judged politically incorrect. But for Emmeline, as for other feminists of her time, militarism and imperialism were integral to her worldview, just as anti-militarism and anti-imperialism have been to feminists in recent times. Her feminism stressed gender rather than class issues, embraced all women and did not fit easily into the male political parties of the day, nor into broader political philosophies such as liberalism, socialism or conservatism.

“The supreme achievement of Mrs Pankhurst”, claimed Ethel Smyth, her one-time close friend, “was creating in women a new sense of power and responsibility, together with a determination to work out their destiny on other lines than those laid down for them since times immemorial by men.”

FOR FURTHER READING

Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story, My Own Story (Evelyn Nash, 1914, reprinted by Virago 1979); Evelyn Sharp, Emmeline Pankhurst and Militant Suffrage, Nineteenth Century, April 1930; E. S. Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement (Longman, 1931); Rebecca West, Mrs Pankhurst” in The Past Victorians, (Ivor Nicholson, 1933); E Sylvia Pankhurst, The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst (Werner Laurie, 1935); Jane Marcus, Introduction to her edited Suffrage and the Pankhurts (Routledge, 1987); entry on Emmeline Pankhurst in Elizabeth Crawford, The Women’s Suffrage Movement (UCL Press, 1999); June Purvis, Emmeline Pankhurst and votes for women, in J. Purvis and S. Stanley Holton (eds), Votes for Women (Routledge, 2000).

June Purvis is Professor of Women’s and Gender History at the University of Portsmouth. Her book Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography will be published by Routledge in July.

Exclusive for History Today readers: Pre-order a copy of June Purvis’ book, Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography (To be published July 2002 by Routledge, 0-415-23978-8) at the special price of £20 (rrp. £25) (FREE postage and packing to UK-based readers. Non UK-based readers can claim the special price of £20 plus postage and packing). To order, call Matthew Hill on +44 (0)1264 343071.