The Women’s Emancipation Union and Radical-Feminist Politics in Britain, 1891–99

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‘If they had a regiment of women who could shoot, they would have the franchise in a week’.¹ Some of those attending the Birmingham conference of the Women’s Emancipation Union (WEU) in the autumn of 1892 would have been stunned to hear Mary Cozens argue this from the platform. Thirty-five-year-old Cozens was a member of the executive council of this new group of parliamentary lobbyists, and her impassioned words quickly attracted criticism. An editorial in the Times was vicious in its condemnation, claiming that the ‘anti-human sentiments of [this] Brummmagem [i.e., Birmingham] pétroleuse’ would unleash ‘the worst passions of the human animal’ and bring forth bloody revolution.² It was not only the press that derided Cozens. Many first-wave feminists were equally disparaging, and among the most vehement was the conservatively minded Frances Power Cobbe, a woman influential in shaping the direction of the emancipation cause since the 1850s.³ Cobbe’s opinion was that a steadfast adherence to the liberal ‘creed of social altruism and moral character’ hitherto practised by middle-class suffragists was infinitely preferable to threats of violence as a means of persuading an obdurate legislature to grant women the vote.⁴ Her verdict on Cozens was derisory, and she later commented that the hothead should have been ‘scraped to death with oyster shells’ as a punishment for such extremism.⁵ Lady Frances Balfour (later president of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage) was equally damning, likening Cozens to ‘a reptile’.⁶ The effect of such criticism was to cement, rather than mitigate, Cozens’s Radicalism, and the majority of her WEU associates rallied to her defence. It is recorded that only three letters of complaint from people ‘in any way connected’ to the organisation were received by its founder and honorary secretary, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, in the days following the speech.⁷ And although the Leeds Mercury summed up Cozens’s oration as doing the greatest injustice to the otherwise ‘fair minded’ discussion that characterised the remainder of the Birmingham gathering, the publicity generated could only help to spread the WEU’s message to a wider audience.⁸

Little is known of Hampshire-born Mary Cozens before her association with Radical-feminist politics in the 1880s, and there is no way of knowing whether her speech was designed to be deliberately inflammatory. She spoke, however, in an environment which she expected might be at least sympathetic to, if not wholeheartedly supportive of, her opinions. This was because members of the WEU adhered to the
most advanced interpretation of contemporary feminist ideals, their deep commitment to egalitarianism making them impervious to the oft-quoted charge that such principles were detrimental to the maintenance of stable society. The WEU demanded for women ‘equality of right and duty with men in all matters affecting the service of the community and the State’, a principle which was embodied in the broadest manifesto of any nineteenth-century suffragist group. It is likely, though, that members would have challenged even that definition, for its inaugural report claimed the organisation to be ‘no mere suffrage society’ but rather what might be argued to be a pioneer ‘feminist’ forum, its members giving equal weight to discussions regarding employment, education, parental rights and divorce. Despite the metaphorical shuddering of traditionalists at the WEU’s avant-garde opinions, in some circles their message constituted a refreshing change from the ‘dull, humdrum’ arguments of contemporaries. A reporter from the Glasgow Herald, for example, commented that being present at a WEU meeting was something akin to ‘passing from a fog into a cold, clear biting atmosphere’ of reform. It must not be considered remarkable, therefore, that the organisation’s first executive council (instituted on 21 September 1891) attracted the services of some of the most radical thinkers of the age. These included the essayist Mona Caird, the woman credited with sparking the fin de siècle debate to refashion the married state upon the ideals of companionship and equality, and Edinburgh suffragist Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, whose book British Freewomen (advocating the restitution of ‘lost’ citizenship rights to women) was published in 1894. Though neither Caird’s nor Stopes’s reaction to Mary Cozens’s speech is known, the latter would have been encouraged by the published comments of another member of her audience, the WEU’s honorary treasurer, Caroline Holyoake Smith. Responding to a critique of Cozens in the Birmingham Daily Post, Smith argued that the actions of those now termed the ‘wild women’ would soon have a greater effect on the cause of reform than any of the ‘smiles and bland indifference to real injustices’ meted out by those less radical. Little did she realise, however, the extent of the ‘wildness’ to come prior to the outbreak of the First World War, when from 1912 militant suffragettes fulfilled the worst fears of the Times correspondent by initiating acts of arson.

Caroline Smith’s Radical credentials were impeccable, for she was the sister of Owenite-socialist George Jacob Holyoake and a personal friend of Robert Owen’s lawyer, William Ashurst. The objective of Owen’s sympathisers had been the institution of a ‘classless society’ and a ‘sexual democracy’. It was a way of living which Frederick Engels later criticised as esoteric, seeking as it did ‘to emancipate all humanity at once’, rather than privileging the working classes. By mid-1845, the communities established to endeavour to live out Owen’s ideal of an equal society had collapsed, but ‘utopian’ socialism left an enduring mark on later Radical politics. Holyoake (himself a WEU subscriber) had also long been acquainted with Wolstenholme Elmy, as part of the ‘Bright circle’ of northern reformers centred on the kinship networks of John Bright, one of the leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League between 1838 and 1846. Many mid-Victorian feminists were intimately connected with the friendship circles surrounding this influential Quaker family and another WEU council member, Agnes Pochin, had petitioned Bright to append a women’s suffrage amendment to his Parliamentary Reform Bill in 1858, though her efforts had been in vain. And as early as 1855, writing under her pseudonym, Justitia, Pochin had published the polemical The Right of Women to Exercise the Elective Franchise.
The roots of the WEU’s governing body, therefore, lay deep in the soil of the political left, and its members subscribed to what Sandra Stanley Holton has defined as ‘the distinctive nature of the Radical suffragist conception of the citizenship of women’, namely a holistic approach to their subjection which placed an equal stress on civil and political disabilities. Many members had taken a prominent part in the mid-Victorian single-issue campaigns to acquire for women legal rights to earnings, property and the guardianship of their children. They had also claimed, and won, increased opportunities for women in the fields of secondary and higher education and in the workplace. Most controversially of all, many had laboured during the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) – an agitation in which only the most fearless feminists participated. Under the provisions of the CDA (first instituted in 1864 and extended in 1866 and 1869), women suspected of prostitution in certain designated districts, even where the matter was not proven, could be forcibly examined and detained in a medical facility against their will. This was, feminists insisted, the grossest infringement of women’s civil rights and, to their delight and profound satisfaction, after a protracted campaign, the CDA were repealed in 1886. WEU campaigners viewed their achievements in single-issue campaigns as piecemeal successes, however, and defined the liberties won as ‘mere scraps and shreds of liberty’ which left the core values of patriarchal society unchallenged. Wolstenholme Elmy wrote that ‘the emancipation of women is a... question [which] strikes down to the roots of social, political and religious life’, and argued that to secure true freedom women of all classes needed to actively acknowledge the necessity of ‘unit[ing] themselves in one great federation [to] fight’ against male tyranny. To pursue this collaboration the middle-class membership of the WEU adopted the identity and labours of those Progressive thinkers Theodore Roosevelt later named as ‘muckrakers’ – those who, by their investigative techniques, speeches and journalism, sought to shame the legislature into instituting reforms.

Written in 1885, a scant few months before the repeal of the CDA was effected, Wolstenholme Elmy’s article, ‘The Emancipation of Women’ (quoted above), set out a hope she would see partially fulfilled during the following decade, as labouring women were welcomed into a movement hitherto perceived as the preserve of the leisured middle class. Traditional methods of protest had failed to propel the cause towards its ultimate goal and, following the loss of Sir Albert Rollit’s Women’s Suffrage Bill in 1892, cross-class collaboration was hailed as a means whereby a new impetus could be injected into the struggle. A particularly successful endeavour in this regard was the Special Appeal petition, signed by over a quarter of a million ‘women of all parties and classes’ and presented to parliament in 1896. Collaboration also offered new opportunities for the education of working-class women in the causes of their subjection, at the core of which, the WEU argued, lay the doctrine of coverture (the legal sublimation of a wife’s person to that of her husband), which bound wives in thrall as the corporal possession of their husbands. Equally important in the Radicals’ eyes, however, was the fact that, as partnerships across class divides facilitated a mass protest force of potentially hundreds of thousands of newly politicised women, feminism gained a new dissenting voice. This oratory was built, in part, on the influences of the ‘politics of disruption’ – the forms of popular protest which had been so influential in securing successive extensions of the franchise for men throughout the nineteenth century.
in the manner of Tom Paine, and it was this forceful tone which now overlaid traditional, altruistic, liberal rhetoric as working-class women ‘restless with convulsive energy’ took up the cause in earnest.29

By their philosophy and oratory, the WEU’s members aided the construction of a new voice within British suffragism which both pre-dated and influenced the militant campaigns of the Edwardian era. It was a Progressive voice, and a rhetoric which, as Ian Tyrrell has argued, has been given but ‘short shrift’ in the era’s historiography (though Tyrrell exempts Holton’s work from his criticism).30 This paper builds on Holton’s research, and brings British Progressive sentiments to the fore by assessing the WEU’s contribution to suffrage history in two important areas. First, it highlights the WEU’s unique contribution to the citizenship debate as the only suffragist organisation to link the political disabilities of women directly to the campaign to end the doctrine of coverture. By seeking a legislative amendment to release married women from judicial ‘non-personhood’, the WEU claimed the legal right for every woman to determine her ‘person’s sacred plan’ by making ‘enforced maternity’ a criminal act.31 The article demonstrates that in its politicisation of this most intimate part of women’s lives, the WEU adopted a rhetoric of resistance to sexual subjection which was then placed in direct correlation to their consent to remain passive under the man-made laws by which they were governed. The issue of women’s obligation to live by the laws of a state which governed without their active participation became an obvious feature of suffragist debate from the time of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902.32 But as we shall see, the seeds of this discourse of rebellion (which arguably reached its apogee in the texts of the infamous Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) from 1903) are clearly evident in the earlier discourse of the WEU. Thus, when the WSPU’s chief strategist, Christabel Pankhurst, declared in her 1913 treatise The Great Scourge and How to End It that ‘the power of maternity is something that women have in addition to their other powers’, something greater and deserving of ‘political power equal with that of men’, she was building directly on a Radical-feminist discourse of the previous century which supported women’s right to chose their own destiny.33

Women’s Emancipation Union members considered no issue, civil or political, beyond the scope of their concern, and they raised the rallying cry that they, as a ‘woman’s army’, would fight to interest themselves ‘in any and all questions’.34 The military metaphor likewise became a well-used rhetorical tool of the WSPU’s leadership, Emmeline Pankhurst noting that suffragettes were a ‘volunteer . . . army in the field’, whose allegiance was, first and foremost, to their fellow women.35 The second object of this paper is, therefore, to investigate the extent to which the WEU provided a fertile discursive environment which enabled the ideals later used by Edwardian militants to flourish. The sympathetic alliance between many former WEU activists and the WSPU highlights obvious continuities in ideals, and Christabel Pankhurst’s close association with Wolstenholme Elmy was in part based on the latter’s admiration for a young worker whose ‘force and originality’ mirrored her own dynamism.36 No political movement, though, can be taken out of its wider context. Recent work by Jon Lawrence and Duncan Tanner has shown the fin de siècle to be a time when theories of citizenship and democracy were undergoing fundamental revisions, just at the moment when the unity which had made the Liberal Party such a formidable force in social reform fractured.37 The defeat of the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1885 had caused bitter factionalism among parliamentarians, the lack of cohesion bringing
down Gladstone’s government in July 1886. And with the electorate now swollen to five-and-a-half million men (60 per cent of the total male population) after the extension of the household franchise under the terms of the Third Reform Act 1884, people were seeking new choices. Influenced by interaction with American Progressives (Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman, for example, attended the final WEU meeting in July 1899, and Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had joined its executive by 1893), WEU members advocated an ‘open, democratic, egalitarian and pioneering society’ freed from the ugliness of urbanisation’s social ills.38 In common with their transatlantic friends, the WEU pursued their course ‘free from party trammels’ and in the spirit of humanitarianism.39 Such a style of campaign was mirrored later by Emmeline Pankhurst who, in 1907, begged ‘the women of all parties [to] forget Party politics and unite in one independent campaign’.40 The thousands of women who flocked to the streets of Edwardian Britain in response to Mrs Pankhurst’s oratorical tour de force were dubbed by Wolstenholme Elmy the ‘Insurgent Women’, and she saw in their deeds the fulfilment of many of the WEU’s earlier objectives.41

**The WEU and suffrage history**

The history of British women’s suffragism takes place on contested terrain and, as both Holton and Krista Cowman have pointed out, the definition of the ‘militant’ feminist is one that is impossible to fix.42 What influences prompted a ‘Radical’ thinker to become a ‘militant’ was a matter for the individual’s conscience, and women (and some men) moved fluidly between differing forms of protest, more often than not allied to more than one campaigning group. This was true, for example, for Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy who, as a secularist, pacifist, humanitarian with a reputation as the doyenne of ‘free love’, was a controversial figure among her colleagues. Such was her notoriety that it contributed to an exclusion from history that has only recently been revised.43 The contemporary historians of women’s suffrage who were contemptuous of her were likewise ambivalent towards the WEU, and at first sight appear to have written it out of the suffrage narrative. Helen Blackburn and Ray Strachey, for example, in their important accounts of what is categorised as ‘constitutional’ or ‘non-violent’ suffragism fail to acknowledge its existence.44 Key narratives of militancy were likewise dismissive, in part because WEU activists had not suffered the indignities of ‘imprisonment, hunger-strike and forcible feeding’ – the mantra of genuine militant activity upon which Hilda Kean has suggested so many suffragette accounts had been founded.45 Sylvia Pankhurst’s influential autobiography, *The Suffragette Movement*, is a case in point, for Pankhurst dismissed the WEU with the words that its policies were only a ‘fine shade of distinction’ apart from those of the genteel suffragists so roundly criticised by Mary Cozens for their ineptitude.46 This, as has been argued elsewhere, was an erroneous assessment and, in common with other areas of Pankhurst’s text, somewhat economical with the truth.47

Other contemporary authors, though less illustrious than Pankhurst, point to a different history. For example, Margaret Sibthorp, editor of the feminist periodical *Shafts*, published 1892–99, claimed the WEU to be ‘prophetic’ and its leader a visionary.48 Ethel Hill and Olga Fenton Shafter likewise saw no reason to denigrate the ‘cool courage’ of those whose campaign methods were more radical. Great suffragists, they argued, came in many guises, and their inclusion of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy in

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the volume of ‘the prominent leaders, and writers, and thinkers’ of the movement they published in 1909 went some way to mitigating both her personal, and by implication the WEU’s, exclusion elsewhere.49 Hill and Shafter concluded that they ‘look[ed] upon the actions – the logical, well-thought-out actions – of any suffrage society as so many means to the same great end’, and saw progress in the deeds of both the ‘suffragist’ and the ‘suffragette’.50 Thus, in common with the late twentieth-century assessments of Holton and David Rubenstein, these earlier authors understood the necessity of placing the actions of the militants in the context from which they had sprung – the decade of the 1890s – rather than perceiving militancy as an aberration or divergence from tradition.51 Therefore, though viewed traditionally as a time of ‘moribund hopelessness’, dormancy and depression, the fin de siècle is now understood as an era of fluidity and evolution among scholars of both citizenship and suffrage.52 And as we shall see, though it was a numerically small and short-lived society, the WEU helped play its part as a binding agent for women of all social and political backgrounds to foster a sense of solidarity as they fought for a stake in the government of their nation by confronting the evils of the ‘brutal, unjust, man-made, judge-made law[s]’ which restricted their freedom.53

Laura Nym Mayhall’s recent book, The Militant Suffrage Movement, was the first full-length work to appraise militancy as an expression of how suffragettes engaged with the theories of citizenship and democracy, a methodology which this paper extends.54 Expanding on previous studies by Holton, Jane Rendall and Stefan Collini, Mayhall claimed that for many of those she termed ‘Radical independent’ suffragists, an active involvement in political life was to be considered an essential factor of ‘engaged citizenship’.55 Radical independents are best defined as Progressives who ‘agreed on issues across party lines . . . [exhibited] hostility towards aristocratic privilege and corruption . . . [and] sought collectivist solutions’ to the problems of the age in the belief that ‘justice would prevail’ – justice in this context being the acknowledgement that women be legally designated as man’s human equal.56 It was in this spirit that the WEU embraced as its sympathisers (in addition to many Radical-liberals including the aristocratic Lady Florence Dixie and Gloucestershire landowner Harriet McIlquham), numerous socialists and members of the wider labour movement. These included Isabella Bream Pearce, later vice-president of the Glasgow Labour Party, and the ex-Liberal head of the Leeds Tailoresses’ Union, Isabella Ford. Ford spoke on the WEU’s behalf at a series of outdoor rallies in the East End of London in 1895, though these were only a tiny fraction of the hundreds of meetings led by members throughout its eight-year life.57 Each speaker fulfilled the demand made in the first statement of the organisation’s objectives, which indicated that every member should be an active ‘worker’ for women’s liberty, their labours designated by Wolstenholme Elmy as having contributed to the ‘uplifting of humanity’.58 Paying mere lip-service to the cause was not enough, and nor was any allegiance to a political party to outweigh a member’s commitment to sex solidarity. While Millicent Garrett Fawcett, as head of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) from 1897, had declared that organisation independent of party politics, Wolstenholme Elmy kept the WEU aloof from its circle. She understood its ‘Suffrage only’ objectives to be too narrowly focused, its organisation inefficient, and many of its members mired in the ‘slough’ of partisan allegiances.59 Though this may be considered a harsh assessment, it must be placed in context, because party-political loyalties had been, in part, the cause of the
cataclysmic schism in the suffrage movement in 1888. An insistence by Radicals on maintaining the demand for the married women’s vote over more conservative calls for a ‘spinsters and widows’ franchise had led to a period of bitter hostilities between the differing factions, who also held contradictory opinions regarding the affiliation of other women’s groups to the ranks of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage. Matters came to a head at a meeting of the Central National Society for Women’s Suffrage in December 1888, when a group of Radicals led by Wolstenholme Elmy exited the gathering in protest. These events led directly to the formation of the Women’s Franchise League in 1889 and, although Wolstenholme Elmy’s association with it was short-lived (on account of further tactical squabbling on the issue of party-political allegiances), the organisation’s broad objectives set the tone the WEU was to follow. To remove the effects of inequality of opportunity for women, be these inequalities related to marriage, work, law or politics, was the bedrock of the creed of both the Women’s Franchise League and the WEU. Although Holton has claimed the ‘conscience of Radical suffragism’ lay at the heart of the Franchise League, it is a term which could be applied more perfectly to the WEU, whose willingness to engage in public debate on the matter of women’s sexual subjection pushed discursive boundaries further even than the Franchise League’s uncompromising attitude to securing married women’s enfranchisement. And while Mayhall’s association of the WEU with the Women’s Franchise League defines the organisations accurately as the leaders of fin de siècle suffragist Progressivism, her text fails to explore in depth the link between the WEU’s formation and its key objective: the politicisation of motherhood and its meaning for militancy.

The juxtaposition of maternity and militancy made explicit in WEU ideology can also be argued to have contributed to its lack of historiographical presence for, as Linda Martz has noted, even among the most recent assessments of militant ideology there lies a ‘negation of the existence of any historical link between sexuality, feminism and suffrage’. For Martz, these twenty-first-century developments are a disturbing step away from the acknowledgement by feminist scholars of the 1980s and 1990s that the ‘sex war’ activists fought was not ‘a titillating sideline, [but] the crux of the suffrage campaign’. It is the aim here to reassert the significance for militancy of Mona Caird’s assessment that the right of a woman to control her ‘maternal instinct [was] the red-hot heart of the battle’ – an opinion that surely contradicts the view posed by Melanie Philips in 2003 that a puritanical outlook and an abhorrence of sexual activity characterised Radical discourse. Sexuality does take pride of place in the short discussions of the WEU contained within late twentieth-century feminist work by Lucy Bland, Susan Kingsley Kent and Sheila Jeffreys, where it is most often explored through the writing of Wolstenholme Elmy and her husband, retired Cheshire silk manufacturer Ben Elmy. Ben Elmy, writing under his pseudonym, Ellis Ethelmer, wrote a series of polemical works on sex education and women’s sexual physiology which were published under the auspices of the WEU between 1893 and 1897. They were, Bland asserts, among the first ‘explicitly feminist’ texts on the subject available and offered ‘a coherent analysis of why and in what manner women were subordinated’. To lay stress upon these texts, however, and particularly Ethelmer’s misconstrued beliefs surrounding menstruation, which he considered to be the result of the pathological abuse by men of women’s bodies, obscures something of the WEU’s wider voice as an agent of Progressive politics. Such discussions also place
the organisation too firmly as an association of high-profile, middle-class intellectuals, something which negates the considerable contribution made to both its ideals and its practical work by the wider membership – for example Amy Hurlston, the daughter of a Coventry watchmaker. Aged just twenty-eight, Hurlston presented a paper on The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands to the WEU conference held in London in March 1893. She informed the audience that personal association with the working women of her home town had highlighted not only their depressing economic plight, but also a new awareness that collaborative association with middle-class feminists could release them from their ‘continual fear of starvation and the gutter of the workhouse’. Hurlston’s survey, which was subsequently published by the WEU, ensured she fulfilled the requirements to designate her as one of Roosevelt’s ‘muckrakers’, for she brought the plight of the women of her area before the public and demanded change. No longer would women lie crushed under the ‘relentless heel’ of patriarchal despotism, Hurlston argued. In order to establish the conditions in which they could thrive as mothers, they would claim their ‘lawful dues’ and fight their way free. While her sentiments do not, perhaps, express the same explicitly violent connotations as those of Mary Cozens eighteen months before, it is clear that Hurlston’s message contained an equally forceful undertone of resistance, and a rhetorical (rather than an explicit) call to arms.

A new instrument: the WEU’s labours and philosophy

Writing to Harriet McIlquham in May 1898, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy reflected on her life’s work. She noted with some pride that as head of the WEU she felt herself to be one of the ‘leaders of the [feminist] revolt’, and she based her claim to prominence on the fact that she had encouraged women to apply ‘the tools’ men had used to gain political freedom in order to secure their own. She argued that if the road to that representation lay before them ‘moistened with blood and tears, and made rough with the bones of those who have fallen in it’ then so be it – little knowing the extent to which the young militants of the next generation would suffer in order to secure their rights as citizens. Direct physical assault on the institutions of the state was not a new phenomenon in British politics. For example, prior to the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, public buildings in the cities of Nottingham and Bristol had made attractive targets for the violence perpetrated by the disenfranchised in their quest for inclusion in the body politic. Violence alone though had not won the struggle for greater representation; rhetorical brilliance had been equally significant in moulding changing perceptions. This is especially true of the oratory of reformers including John Stuart Mill, the political economist and parliamentarian who Wolstenholme Elmy declared should be lauded as the true ‘champion’ of the women’s movement. Mill had sought to introduce an amendment to the Electoral Reform Bill of 1866 which would have granted a very limited number of propertied women the vote, and had spoken with passion on the topic in the House of Commons. In the event, the Commons voted to extend the male householder franchise throughout the country. Mill’s rhetoric earned him both plaudits and reproaches as his ‘feminist’ amendment was swept aside, but his persuasive eloquence paved the way for others. The legacy of the WEU to the cause of women’s emancipation lay in its rhetoric and in the construction of a complex, but decisive language of defiance; only this time the rhetoric was specifically constructed against
women’s subjection from all standpoints: political, socio-economic, legal and sexual. Despite gathering into its circle a series of ‘strange bedfellows’ (as F. M. L. Thompson defined the individual personalities and political traditions which comprised British Progressivism), their role as influencers of public opinion was important.77 Indeed, the organisation was born as a consequence of the public’s response to Wolstenholme Elmy’s linguistic flair, and instituted in the light of her willingness to enter into an open debate on the nature of marriage itself.

As we have seen, Amy Hurlston had identified within the labouring mothers of the Midlands an increasing awareness of their oppression. Now, more receptive than hitherto to messages of transformation, they were being educated to seek change, to claim economic rights and ‘demand more of the world’.78 This shift in working-class consciousness, however, had not merely been brought about by a one-to-one engagement with feminist agents such as Hurlston. Also important was the fact that the issue of marriage and sexuality had become a hot topic in the fin de siècle populist press as a consequence of lurid reports concerning ‘white-slave’ trafficking and the Whitechapel murders, the series of horrific crimes against London prostitutes carried out by Jack the Ripper in 1888.79 Equally significant, however, was the notorious case of Regina v. Jackson (known colloquially as the Clitheroe case) and it was this sensational, and widely reported, legal ruling which precipitated the formation of the WEU. This controversial case had been brought to court on 16 March 1891 by Edmund Jackson in an attempt to secure restitution of conjugal rights following his abduction and imprisonment of his wife against her will.80 Though initially successful, his endeavours ultimately failed when the Court of Appeal set Emily Jackson at liberty under a writ of habeas corpus.81 While traditionalists, predictably, declared the ruling would shatter the foundations of stable society, Wolstenholme Elmy saw both progress and justice in it. This was because she understood it to have overruled centuries of common-law doctrine which bound a wife, without possibility of appeal, to the sexual demands of her husband.82 Accordingly elated, she declared in print that ‘the [sexual] servitude of the English wife [had] become a nightmare of the past, never... to be recalled to life again’ – strong words, although her assessment of the situation was woefully naïve.83 Nonetheless, the impact of the subsequent debate was such that the series of five letters she wrote to the editor of the Manchester Guardian prompted ‘many expressions of urgent desire’ that a new society be formed in order to capitalise on the shift in women’s legal status.84 A mere three months later, energised by what Ginger Frost has termed the ‘pleasurable sensation of participating in [a] controversy’, Wolstenholme Elmy had circulated the draft programme of the WEU to her future colleagues for approval.85

Wolstenholme Elmy, the veteran of so many successful feminist campaigns, was confident that the broad-based, four-point agenda of the new organisation would attract support.86 She did not, however, follow the line later taken by Emmeline Pankhurst in the case of the WSPU and insist that the WEU be an ‘all-women’ organisation.87 Three eminent lawyers, John Bayly, Charles Beaumont and John Boyd Kinnear, joined its executive council, and men (particularly members of parliament) were welcome to participate in or financially support WEU endeavours and attend its public meetings.88 Though this allies the WEU’s organisational structure more firmly to the practices of Victorian, rather than Edwardian suffragism, the language of an article Wolstenholme Elmy published in Shafts indicates a decided move away from the belief that, in...
time, a male legislature would capitulate and grant the suffrage as a boon to those biddable women who had shown themselves ‘worthy’ of the vote. ‘Women must win their final victory by their own efforts [and] open the gates of freedom by their own exertions’, Wolstenholme Elmy argued, and she urged that ‘every woman can help . . . by [the application of] individual personal influence and effort’.89 Such words clearly subscribe to the Byronic notion that those who wished for freedom ‘must themselves strike the blow’, a precept which lay at the heart of Edwardian militant philosophy.90 To achieve this end, the WEU pursued its objectives via the institution of a regional network of local organisers, in order to better facilitate active engagement with women of all social groups. This subsequently became the methodological bedrock of the WSPU’s organisational structure, and it allowed for some degree of autonomy among local activists, both in management of their time, in fundraising and in the connections they made.91 While Wolstenholme Elmy has been depicted elsewhere as an autocratic leader of the WEU (for example, when suggesting to McIlquham that the council be restricted to seven members), she in fact placed a great deal of reliance on its local activists – the ‘real workers’ who, she believed, were the life force of ‘any great movement’.92

By the close of 1894, ten regional offices had been established, covering the industrial conurbations of Birmingham, Leeds, Coventry and Glasgow, together with others in the more rural districts of Bath, Bedford, Dumbartonshire and Galloway.93 Another office was opened in Islington, north London, which provided a base for both the WEU’s parliamentary work and its outreach into the East End factory districts. Though the establishment of a WEU parliamentary sub-committee under the leadership of Mary Cozens in December 1893 caused terrible tensions (resulting in Cozens’s departure from the WEU the following February), the regional organisers aided the WEU’s labours by arranging lecture tours, disseminating literature, organising petitions and liaising with other suffragist groups including the politically allied Women’s Liberal Federation and the Conservative Primrose League.94 In order to maximise the organisation’s impact in her own locality of Manchester and north Cheshire, Wolstenholme Elmy enlisted the help of Esther Roper, dynamic secretary of the Manchester National Society for Women’s Suffrage, this happy alliance giving WEU speakers access to a wide circle of labour-orientated audiences. By 1895, Oxford and Edinburgh also hosted regional centres, the local secretary of the latter being Mrs L. Mackenzie.95 Mackenzie had long been acquainted with Wolstenholme Elmy, working diligently to aid the campaign for changes to child custody rights on behalf of separated wives: changes which had been instituted in the Guardianship of Infants Act 1886.96 Now, as a WEU local secretary, Mackenzie would come to her friend’s help again as the organisation reconceptualised the institution of marriage in order to base the claim for women’s suffrage on the grounds of their bodily autonomy.

Though often strident in their condemnation of marriage, WEU activists (or indeed feminists more generally) were far from being its only critics in the 1890s. Executive council member Charles Beaumont, for example, noted that ‘not only private individuals, but editors and magistrates’ all covered yards of newsprint ‘gravely holding forth’ on the implications of the Clitheroe judgment. Personally, although Beaumont was horrified by what he termed the tactics of the ‘Middle Ages’ which had characterised Edmund Jackson’s imprisonment of his wife, he was more disgusted still that ‘many good lawyers . . . believe[d] him to be acting within his legal rights’.97 The position
though was complex, and even among critics of the Court of Appeal’s ruling opinions differed. The lawyers Beaumont censured were deeply divided, and some trenchantly maintained that by marrying ‘a wife voluntarily part[ed] with her full liberty’. Others, less tainted by misogyny, were nonetheless keen for further reforms in order to iron out the general confusion within the marriage laws – even if those reforms were carried through in order to secure the rights of husbands in, for example, cases of a wife’s desertion. The keenest female critic of the Clitheroe judgment was journalist and novelist Eliza Lynn Linton, who declared it to have been ‘founded on nothing more solid than the froth of caprice’ and the pronouncement of Emily Jackson that she had ‘changed her mind’. Though Linton’s vehement anti-feminism may have set her at odds with Wolstenholme Elmy on the issue, Wolstenholme Elmy was tactful with regard to Linton’s own failed marriage. She considered Linton the victim of her husband’s conceit, a view which portrayed a greater degree of lenient charity than Linton bequeathed to the ‘wild women’ and ‘free lovers’ who supported the ‘grimmer designs of the women’s rights movement’ – a statement which would, of course, have included the secularist Wolstenholme Elmy, and others of the WEU, in its remit. For her part, Wolstenholme Elmy sought to advocate partnerships which placed ‘the moral regeneration of mankind’ at their heart. She therefore applauded the Clitheroe decision on the grounds that it was ‘epoch-making in its immediate consequences’, its precepts supplanting ‘the old worn-out code of master and slave’ with the ethics of justice and equality. This comment, from the woman who, in 1880, was the first to speak from a public platform on the topic of marital rape, was decisive in its support for the view that it was the lot of every married woman to act as the moral rejuvenator of a world plagued by the ‘fantasies of decay and degeneration’ that permeated modern, urbanised society. Wolstenholme Elmy was not shy of advocating that this struggle would be ‘a revolt’ against patriarchy and a battle based upon the ‘legal right of a wife to her personal freedom’. In another public address, this time before the International Congress of Women in June 1899, she asserted that ‘enforced maternity’ was a ‘crime . . . against the mother, the child, the race and humanity’ and should be punished accordingly. She concluded that although considered a ‘natural’ impulse, man’s unbridled lust debased the whole of society, and that the sad consequences of judicially sanctioned lasciviousness: disease, economic suffering and moral degeneracy, could only be remedied by the parliament whose laws upheld the iniquities. Repeated in Wolstenholme Elmy’s perhaps less emotive prose, the statement echoes Mona Caird’s assertion that maternity represented the ‘red-hot heart’ of the feminist battle.

The WEU’s quest, therefore, built on elements of previous feminist activism, in that they now sought a legislative barrier against the final (and most stubborn) element of the doctrine of coverture as they had fought in 1870 to extend the provisions of the laws of equity to secure the property of poor, labouring women. Wolstenholme Elmy, though, was under no illusions as to the difficulties the organisation faced in securing the support of those who had the power to push through reform, for she had already laboured in vain from 1883 to obtain support for a parliamentary bill which tackled the topic of marital rape directly. Her commendable and extensive efforts had been based upon a strong adherence to John Stuart Mill’s assertion in his influential text *The Subjection of Women* that it was ‘barbarous . . . that one individual could, under any circumstances, have a right to the person of another’. Wolstenholme Elmy claimed that to uphold the double standard of sexual morality was to make wives slaves to
their husband’s lust and that opposition to this position, more than any other, was ‘the true meaning of women’s suffrage’. Once armed with the power of the vote, she contended, women would swiftly ensure the passage of the much-needed laws. Her depth of engagement with Mill’s ideology was both extensive and critical. It is, therefore, only to be expected that she noted the ‘double analogy’ implicit in Mill’s treatise, namely that his ‘use of slavery as analogous to women’s condition [was] overlaid with an older political imagery of tyranny and despotism’, characteristics which could be legitimately challenged by the politically marginalised to achieve redress. However, the ideals and campaigns of the WEU implied a greater rebellion than Mill envisaged, by incorporating within the ‘politics of disruption’ not only those middle-class women who would gain the parliamentary vote under existing electoral qualifications (and who were, therefore, in direct relationship with their tyrannical ‘oppressors’) but all womanhood. When Charlotte Carmichael Stopes declared to the audience of the WEU’s 1896 conference that the gathering represented a ‘new instrument’ (Novum Organum) of reform, she spoke inclusively, and the contribution to future progress that could be made by the ‘voteless toilers’ – the mothers of the labouring classes – was not deemed irrelevant.

The extent to which wives, even armed with a legislative sanction against marital rape, would have taken to law their right to refuse a husband’s demands for sex remains questionable. Nevertheless, it was around the premise that they would do so that Wolstenholme Elmy refashioned the discourse surrounding female bodily autonomy in order to link the issue of ‘consent’ to maternity to ‘consent’ in matters of government. She had begun to formulate the concept in 1882, when, in a letter to the Cambrian News, she argued that ‘not even war’ should compromise the vision of a truly egalitarian construction of citizenship. ‘War is a hideous and unnatural thing’, she asserted, but if it has to exist there is no reason why women should not take part in it as men take part in it, facing the same risks and dangers in acknowledgement of their common humanity. In the 1890s, working at the head of the WEU, she extended the argument. She applied the language of combat to highlight the fact that since the Third Reform Act 1884, approaching six million men of all social groups had enjoyed the privilege of electing the representatives of a government that might send them to die for their country; the ability to defend the nation in war was the bedrock of the traditional construction of citizenship. In an 1895 pamphlet entitled Women and the Law, Wolstenholme Elmy argued that if consenting to offer one’s life for the nation was the main constituent of determining the electoral qualification, then women possessed the superior claim, having ‘risk[ed] their lives’ daily in childbirth for the ‘perpetuation and progress of the race’ from which the nation drew its armies. She demanded independence for women, first to bear only those children whose health and wellbeing they could ensure, and second as a means to insert women’s voice into the rhetoric of warfare (via the speeches of their elected representatives) as an effective counter to the aggressive bellicosity of state directives that sent so many to their deaths. She argued that the ‘special dignity and worthiness’ possessed by mothers was ‘superior to that of the mere male faculty of fighting’, and it was for this reason that they now demanded the ‘fullest opportunity for self-development’ afforded by the possession of the rights and duties of national citizenship.

Wolstenholme Elmy’s ultimate goal was not, however, to glorify war. She had the heart of a humanitarian and her aim was precisely the opposite. A lifelong pacifist,
she had adopted the rhetoric of combat only to construct a new vision of women’s citizenship based on their right to corporal individuality, not to envision the moment when women would actually take their place on the battlefield. Paradoxically, when considering that the basis for militancy by women had been penned from an engagement with the military ideal of citizenship, she argued that ‘peaceful evolution’ rather than ‘violent revolution’ was the true way to secure the world’s progress. Nevertheless, in August 1899, only weeks after the WEU was wound up, she once again put pen to paper to argue forcefully for women’s citizenship in a *Manchester Guardian* article entitled ‘Our “Outlanders” at Home’. As the British government was preparing to dispatch troops ostensibly to defend the electoral rights of Uitlander settlers in South Africa, Wolstenholme Elmy argued that the political grievances of the British woman were directly comparable to the disfranchised settlers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. If force appeared now to be legitimated as a method of resolving citizenship disputations through these actions of the British government, then equally force was available to those excluded from citizenship as a means of claiming it. Her words were among the first written by Radical independents on the subject, but her ‘humble pupil’, Dora Montefiore, took up the mantle forcefully as the war progressed. And a mere two months later, Montefiore argued that ‘if nothing but war will meet the situation, then war must be declared by women at all parliamentary elections’, by a refusal to support any candidate who did not admit the moral benefits that would result from the women’s franchise. Controversially, then, in the midst of pacifist rhetoric, the activists of the WEU had declared war on the British government. They underlined their militancy by an ‘insistence on being treated as full participants in the theatre of public politics’, and threatened to invade, in the maelstrom of electioneering fervour, the citadel of patriarchal privilege which for so long had ensured their voice remained unheard.

**The WEU, the socialists and the WSPU**

Formal membership of the WEU never exceeded 200, and therefore any attempt to claim that it was truly the dynamic, large-scale fighting force envisioned by Wolstenholme Elmy at its outset can, with some credence, be challenged. Nevertheless, to argue for national citizenship on the grounds of a woman’s right to choose the direction her maternity would take was a significant matter, and it was a demand made by the WEU on behalf ‘not [of] this generation only, but for all men, for all women, and for all time’. This personal plea for social regeneration was echoed again and again by the WEU’s wider membership, who sought not a sop to public opinion (which was becoming increasingly amenable to the notion of a middle-class feminine civic role), but rather ‘The Awakening of Woman’, the title of a polemical treatise by theosophist Frances Swiney. Swiney, herself a member of the WEU, affirmed that ‘woman’s patient endurance of pain is a psychic quality, and not a merely physical one’ and, as the age of the ‘New Woman’ dawned, a new spirit was being forged among ultra-Radicals which understood feminism to be a conscious creed – something to be experienced from within as well as without. Though Lucy Delap understands this ‘introspective turn’ within feminism to have reached its apogee during the 1910s and 1920s in the actions of, among others, the WSPU’s Dora Marsden, from the earliest days of the WEU its local organisers had recorded an embryonic shift in
Although it is doubtful that even a handful of those involved would have acknowledged their feelings as ‘feminist’ *per se*, Amy Hurlston noted that she had witnessed in the working-class women of the Midlands an awareness of their oppression not previously evident, their consciences awakened by an acknowledgment that (both individually and as a collective) they were deeply affected by patriarchal systems. What they yearned for was ‘emancipation from the tyranny of custom’ and a right to bargain for a fair day’s wage to feed and clothe the wretched children the laws of coverture required they bear without limit. WEU local organisers understood it to be their *duty*, both to personally awaken a feminist mindset in the hearts and minds of the poor and to bring before the public accounts of the true effects of socio-economic deprivation. These literary exposés nestle precisely within the boundaries of the approach to journalism defined as ‘muckraking’ by Roosevelt, the attributes of the successful author being ‘personal investigative exploration, sympathy with the working-class and an abiding interest in understanding the social, economic and political forces shaping society’. Articles were written both to highlight the author’s moral indignation and to demand legislative change. And viewing the WEU’s archive through the lens of Progressivism, and understanding its activists to be ‘social housekeepers’ (rather than simply moral purists), can transform our understanding of these pre-militant suffragists. Radical independents were not afraid to get their hands dirty, and many were as comfortable speaking outside factory gates or in rowdy political meetings, as they were declaiming to select friendly gatherings in metropolitan drawing-rooms. On the occasion when, in July 1892, Wolstenholme Elmy and others took the WEU’s message before a 1,000-strong crowd in Macclesfield, such was the row that her speech could be heard only by the ‘few front rows’. A dogged determination to continue speaking, even in the face of extreme provocation, would later become the hallmark of the militant suffragette.

The highs and lows of WEU campaigning are recorded purely because Wolstenholme Elmy believed its activities historically significant and wished to secure its archive, which she personally forwarded to the British Museum. Within the collection, it is obvious that Hurlston’s paper was not an isolated example of ‘muckraking’. Another author who had gathered first-hand evidence of the lives of the labouring poor was William Henry Wilkins, a somewhat paradoxical figure who is best known for his work as literary assistant to Isabel, Lady Burton (widow of anthropologist Sir Richard Francis Burton). A notorious anti-Semite and anti-alienist (affiliations not uncommon among Progressives), Wilkins acted as private secretary to Lord Dunraven, the chairman of the House of Lords Commission into the Sweated Trades. In the course of his labours, Wilkins had conducted personal research into the lives of the needlewomen of the East End of London, and presented a summary of his work to the WEU’s 1893 conference. His paper, ‘The Bitter Cry of the Voteless Toilers’, put forward an appeal not only for the enfranchisement of the middle classes but of the ‘weak, disorganised, underpaid and overworked’ mothers of the masses. Only with the vote, Wilkins concluded, would these ‘feeble, crushed’ women be freed to fight the ‘physical evil[s]’ of ill-health and moral laxity that impaired the ‘tender delights’ they might experience as mothers who were full citizens of their country. For only with the vote could they work to rejuvenate the nation’s health through the birth of healthy children. This ideal, when combined with Wolstenholme Elmy’s insistence that women, once enfranchised, would influence the passage of legislation against
marital rape, squared the circle linking regeneration, bodily autonomy and consent to government. It also highlighted the complicated nature of Progressive suffragist politics, for Wilkins’s desire that the government actively intervene to promote social and industrial reform (even if the personal rights of some members of the community would be affected), was not shared or advocated by all WEU members.

Though it has been asserted that Progressive doctrine allies neatly with the interventionalist aims of ‘New’ Liberalism, certain WEU members retained an allegiance to more ‘traditional’ ideals, privileging individualism. Wolstenholme Elmy was one such, and in July 1892 went so far as to declare that the ‘Liberalism [she] believed in [was] dead and buried’. 138 As a key member of the executive of the Personal Rights Association until after the WEU’s formation, she continued to lobby for the freedom of poor women to earn their livelihood by any means they chose, even if their preferred method was prostitution. She wrote for Shafts that, although ‘the moral crusade of the nineteenth century’ had been against the ignominious morals of men (which ensured sexually transmitted diseases spread without check among women and children across the class spectrum), those women unable to support themselves economically by any other means should not be criminalised (as they had been under the CDA legislation) for carrying on the only work that could ensure their survival. 139 Contemporaneously, she insisted that state intervention had replaced religion as the chief arbiter of women’s subjection. Direct state involvement, she argued, had ‘cripple[d] the weak and strong alike’, and by ‘its restrictive laws . . . had identified itself with caucus, coercion, closure and compulsion’. 140 Given this forceful rhetoric, it might be wondered how such views could mingle so seamlessly in WEU circles with those of socialists, but it can be understood more easily if the context of Wolstenholme Elmy’s engagement with key figures of the Chartist movement is considered. For a short while, the WEU had been intimately connected with Liberal MP Llewellyn Atherley-Jones, whose challenge to assume its leadership had been firmly rebuffed by Wolstenholme Elmy on the grounds that it needed ‘no master’. 141 She wrote to McIlquham that Atherley-Jones showed none of the political bravery and staunchness exhibited by his father, the Chartist Ernest Jones, with whom she had worked as long ago as 1867 as a fellow member of the Manchester Committee for the Enfranchisement of Women. 142 The ‘falling away’ of the son from the path lit by the father was heartbreaking, she noted, and she cast Atherley-Jones as a turncoat who put party-political concerns before humanitarian ideals in ways Ernest Jones would have considered shameful. 143 Wolstenholme Elmy took pride in her association with Chartism (particularly noting Chartist women’s bravery in the face of violence), but the disputes and differences within late nineteenth-century party-political ideology should not be considered too deeply when seeking to tease out her personal perspective. 144 Privately, her stance was simplistic. She was, first and foremost, a humanitarian seeking the ‘perfect’ world, and though she was to become lauded as the ‘grey matter in the brains of the women’s movement’ she was also, paradoxically, esoteric. 145 She saw in feminist agency the path towards a just society, and later wrote to Harriet McIlquham that while she ‘regard[ed] the Enfranchisement of women as of more urgent importance than the establishment of Socialism’ she did so because ‘manned Socialism would be little, if at all better – than a manmade Liberalism, or Toryism’. 146 Christabel Pankhurst was to come to much the same conclusion when, in March 1903, she announced to the socialist readers of the Labour Leader that the welfare of women was not necessarily secure ‘in the hands of the men’s Labour Party’. 147
Isabella Bream Pearce’s opinion on the matter was given on the platform of the WEU’s 1896 conference and, unsurprisingly, she upheld the power of socialism as a transforming force. An intellectual and securely middle class, Pearce suffered no difficulty in reconciling the demands of allegiance to both feminism and socialism, unlike the many working-class women who had to traverse a complex minefield of divided loyalties in the process of feminist activism.\textsuperscript{148} Pearce adroitly linked the themes of socialist politics, feminist consciousness, bodily autonomy and the rejuvenation of society in a paper entitled \textit{Women and Factory Legislation}. Women, Pearce argued, were ‘beginning to awake’ to the challenges posed by modern living – challenges that needed a new approach to governance. Pearce was convinced that the people, when awakened to the fact that the power and the ‘duty to prevent the possibility of social misery’ lay with them, would ‘recognise . . . their responsibilities [and] devise a new system’ which would make it impossible in the future for any individual to oppress a fellow human being. ‘Call it Socialism or call it what you will’, Pearce declared, this was the means by which humanity would thrive.\textsuperscript{149}

While her political proclivities are obvious in her analysis of the destructive power of the capitalist economy, Pearce praised the fact that it was these very conditions that had awakened the spirit of battle in women, and she admired especially the resistance labouring women had made against protective legislation that had effected (even when seeking to ‘confer a benefit’) to discriminate against them.\textsuperscript{150} Directly linking the analogy of the working woman as her employer’s chattel to a wife’s ‘complete surrender of her bodily person’ to her husband’s pleasure, Pearce contended that women were no longer content to ‘sell [their] birthright . . . for “a mess of pottage”’ either in labouring or domestic life. The time of slavery was now at an end.

In concluding her comprehensive appraisal of the position, Pearce argued that ‘for the race to progress we cannot go back, [but only] forward to a new and better life’.\textsuperscript{151} And for Pearce and many like her, that better life was envisioned through socialism or via the Trade Union movement. Lawrence has claimed that ‘the rational aspirations of the labour movement’ gave both direction and ‘organisational strength’ to Radical suffragists but, while the tide of suffragism was moving afresh in this area, the influence of the WEU on its actions was waning.\textsuperscript{152} Following a collapse of morale after the defeat of the Women’s Suffrage Bill in July 1897, the organisation’s income halved, and its financial mainstay, Mrs Russell Carpenter, died the following spring.\textsuperscript{153} Wolstenholme Elmy’s desire to uphold the broad approach to women’s subjection within its programme (and to continually highlight the controversial issue of marital rape) had ensured its isolation from the wider movement, now largely united under the banner of the NUWSS in campaigning for the single issue of the vote. And as a non-party-political group, the WEU was unable to associate formally with socialist organisations, which might have secured its financial future. The loose nature of the Progressive coalition and the disparate allegiances of its members ensured few, if any, were committed solely to the WEU’s work and, when Wolstenholme Elmy’s own precarious finances ensured she could no longer facilitate its expenditure, she reluctantly posted the programme of the final meeting in June 1899. The gathering took place in London on 1 July, contemporaneously with the International Congress of Women. \textit{Shafts} recorded that those assembled for the ‘last expression of respect, love, and regret inexpressible’ that Wolstenholme Elmy had drawn the organisation’s work to a close had almost found it ‘too hard to part with’ her. They credited her, though,
with already setting in motion a new ‘great work . . . consolidat[ing] stone by stone, the great edifice of the future power and strength of the human being’ via an unshakeable determination to continue to campaign for the ‘struggle of women for freedom and opportunity’.¹⁵⁴

If history is to look for the legacy of the Women’s Emancipation Union, it must do so by following Wolstenholme Elmy’s actions in the years after its demise. Now acting individually, but at the centre of a famed network of contacts, she began labouring in earnest to secure that which she had long sought – a ‘great federation’ of ‘real workers’ who were prepared to risk everything for the women’s cause.¹⁵⁵ Wolstenholme Elmy’s correspondence network had, on one occasion alone, provided 200 names of those likely to be sympathetic to the Special Appeal in 1893; the first true evidence of the shift to cross-class activism.¹⁵⁶ Now the same methods bore fruit again, and in the week now best known for the formation of Emmeline Pankhurst’s WSPU, Wolstenholme Elmy’s energies were completely consumed by the organisation of a conference which would be the beginning of a great uprising of women of all classes in pursuit of their freedom. It was this initiative, rather than the inception of the WSPU, which one contemporary categorised as effectively launching the ‘new and aggressive phase’ of women’s activism.¹⁵⁷ The ideal of a mobilised feminist force Wolstenholme Elmy had envisaged since the WEU’s foundation came to fruition with the meeting of the National Convention in Defence of the Civic Rights of Women on 16–17 October 1903, an event planned, executed and financially underwritten through her collaboration with William T. Stead, ‘Britain’s most notorious muckraker’.¹⁵⁸

It is difficult, at first, to find evidence of Wolstenholme Elmy’s crucial role in the organisation of the convention – for it was advertised and promoted under the auspices of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. And though Leslie Hume, historian of the NUWSS, has acknowledged that her ‘prodding’ was significant, it is a judgement that belies the extent of her labours.¹⁵⁹ A letter to McIlquham of 1 June 1903 clearly highlights her endeavours. She had, the previous month, attended a dinner for sixty guests at the headquarters of Stead’s Review of Reviews at Mowbray House where her after-dinner address (given standing on a chair, such was the press in the room) had been so positively received that Stead was prompted to offer financial backing to a ‘great Women’s Suffrage Convention’ if Wolstenholme Elmy could drum up support for it.¹⁶⁰ She later recalled, albeit with some degree of personal conceit, that she had spent the following summer ‘enthus[ing]’ the NUWSS regarding the project; although she noted with appreciation the aid she received from those socialists who had previously supported the WEU’s labours.¹⁶¹ She recalled how Isabella Ford and Eva Gore-Booth, for example, had spoken convincingly of the determination amongst the ‘organised women in Lancashire . . . to make their influence felt at the general election, by refusing to support any candidate who failed to support women’s suffrage’.¹⁶² In practice this would mean the arduous work of canvassing, clerical assistance and administration would not be carried out should the women withdraw their consent to perform such services. In its report of the convention, the Manchester Guardian commented that this decisive shift in women’s political strategy had now been adopted ‘across the board’, whereas previously only the small Union of Practical Suffragists had advocated making the matter a ‘test question’.¹⁶³

Women from over twenty suffrage and labour groups had attended the convention held in Holborn Town Hall, and Stead used his speech from the platform to declare to

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the hundreds assembled that, by refusing support for women’s suffrage, a parliamentary candidate had implicitly declared that ‘if women [were] not fit to vote they [were] not fit to canvass’. Women, by declining to submit before such an assumption, were thereby taking up the challenge of refusing to ‘consent’ to a concept of citizenship in which they had no direct influence: this being the ‘militant’ line Wolstenholme Elmy had taken in her speech at Mowbray House and which likewise built on the sentiments she had expressed within the pages of *Women and the Law* in 1895 and ‘Our “Outlanders” at Home’ in 1899. The issue of free choice (be it in a woman’s social or political life), a matter central to WEU philosophy, became an integral part of wider suffragist ideology during the convention – for if women could refuse, they could also resist. Thus the stage was set for a new form of action.

**Conclusion**

Two years after the success of the convention, Wolstenholme Elmy wrote of her pride in the fearless actions of Christabel Pankhurst and mill-girl Annie Kenney as they endured arrest and imprisonment for daring to bring the topic of women’s suffrage before Sir Edward Grey at a Liberal political meeting. At a banquet held in Manchester’s Free Trade Hall following the prisoners’ release, Kenney had claimed that ‘there is not a woman on this platform who would not gladly go to prison, to win freedom for her sisters’. Wolstenholme Elmy (sharing the platform) had looked with delight at the slight figure she had met some months earlier at a Trades Union gathering, an afternoon when Kenney had plied the veteran activist with any number of questions regarding suffragist tactics. Wolstenholme Elmy viewed these events with a tinge of nostalgia also, as she recalled her own protest, when head of the WEU, outside the House of Commons after the loss of the Women’s Suffrage Bill in 1897. Though authority had ‘complained’, she noted, her disruptive actions had not earned her arrest, though even at sixty-three years of age she appeared to relish the prospect. She told Kenney on their first meeting that she ‘feared W[omen’s] S[uffrage] would never be won in England till women were willing to go to prison for its sake’, and she believed that now, and in the hands of those who would earn the designation of ‘suffragette’, her prophesy would be fulfilled.

The effectiveness of militancy as a tactic has occupied historians’ minds for a number of years. Looking backwards into the *fin de siècle*, however, helps understanding of the reasons for its inception, particularly in the texts of those designated as society’s ‘muckrakers’. The Radical independent Progressives of the WEU helped to facilitate and explore new ideals and methods by which feminists could stake a place for women in the body politic. Nonetheless, and amid charges of esotericism and marginality, it has been simple for historians to dismiss the organisation as insignificant and to classify it solely as the product of its founder’s ideals. While its membership, a combination of individualists and socialists, of racists, pacifists, jingoists and internationalists, were never practically going to bond into the united, dynamic force for change that Wolstenholme Elmy envisaged, it is still possible to claim that significant rhetorical precursors of the Edwardian militant campaign can be traced to its ideology – not least in the desire of Christabel Pankhurst that a woman be freed from the necessity of making a ‘permanent sex bargain for her maintenance’, and for that of her children. The WEU campaigned uniquely under the premise that a woman’s bodily
autonomy alone granted her the rights (and duties) of citizenship. Such an approach drew women of all classes into the discursive framework, which again prefigured the totally ‘woman-centred’ ethos of the militants. Ultimately, of course, it was Mary Cozens’s militaristic outburst that provided the first hint of women’s armed insurrection against political exclusion and social subjection. Whether or not it is possible to claim her ideals as typical of WEU members is not the crux of the matter, which is, rather, the articulation of force itself. A reporter from the Daily Graphic recorded the words of Mrs Sanderson, who followed Cozens to the platform in October 1892. Sanderson said that ‘though it appeared opposed to woman-nature . . . to use such means’ as guns and dynamite in the cause of politics, women would find ‘that whenever a revolution had taken place it had been brought about by the administration of brute force’.

While it would be several years before the ‘regiment of women’ Cozens yearned for took to the streets to perpetrate acts of arson, window-smashing and axe-throwing, rhetorically the spark had been lit which would fan the flame. Therefore, and within the boundaries of one of the smallest groupings working within women’s politics, Radical-feminist sentiment had taken an evolutionary and decisive turn.

Notes

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2. Times, 12 November 1892.
8. ‘Women’s Emancipation Union’, Leeds Mercury, 28 October 1892.
11. WEU, Inaugural Report, 1892, p. 2.
21. Wolstenholme Elmy for example was secretary of the Married Women’s Property Committee from 1867–82; founder and promoter of the campaign to secure the Guardianship of Infants Act, 1886; founder member of the Manchester Board of Schoolmistresses in 1865; and a member of the executive committees of both the National Association and the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts from 1870.
24. [EWE], ‘Emancipation of Women’, p. 4. Emphasis in original.
31. Ellis Ethelmer [pseudonym of Benjamin J. Elmy], *Woman Free* (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1893), stanza 40.
36. EWE to HM, 30 March 1904, EWEP, fol. 263.
37. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*; Duncan Tanner, ‘Ideological Debate in Edwardian Labour Politics: Radicalism,Revisionism and Socialism’, in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alistair J. Reid (eds), *Currents of


41. EWE, ‘Song of the Insurgent Women’, 14 November 1906, EWEP, fol. 11.


50. Hill and Shafter (eds), Great Suffragists, p. 13.


52. Pankhurst, Suffragette Movement, p. 50.

53. Ignota [Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy], ‘Judicial Sex Bias’, p. 283.

54. Mayhall, Militant Suffrage Movement.


57. WEU, Third Report, 1896, p. 10.

58. WEU, Final Report, pp. 1–2.

59. EWE to HM, 18 December 1898, EWEP, fol. 276; EWE to HM, 31 October 1896, EWEP, fol. 330.

60. Holton, Suffrage Days, pp. 75–6.

61. So significant were the divisions resulting from this event that two separate suffragist societies were formed. The first, the Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage, was the more conservative grouping, the second, the Central National Society for Women’s Suffrage, accepted ‘new rules’ which allowed other women’s organisations to associate, paving the way for a link with, among other groups, the Women’s Liberal Association. Holton, Suffrage Days, p. 75.

62. Two key factors forced Wolstenholme Elmy’s resignation from the Women’s Franchise League in July 1890. The first was her belief that Ursula Bright and others on its executive sought to ally the group...
formally to the Liberal Party and second, she understood that her colleagues’ determination to resist unilaterally any bill that did not expressly enfranchise married women would create unnecessary problems for the women’s movement. For Wolstenholme Elmy’s private opinions on these matters, see EWE to HM, 25 June 1890, EWEP, fol. 131. See also EWE to HM, 29 October 1890, EWEP, fol. 139.


68. Ellis Ethelmer, Life to Woman (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1896); Ellis Ethelmer, The Human Flower (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1894); Ellis Ethelmer, Baby Buds (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1895); Ellis Ethelmer, Phases of Love: As It Was, As It Is, As It May Be (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union, 1897).

69. Bland, Banishing the Beast, p. 141.


72. EWE to HM, 30 May 1898, EWEP, fol. 215.

73. [EWE], ‘The Emancipation of Women’, p. 5 (leaflet re-printed from the Cambrian News, 2 October 1885), WEU.


75. EWE to HM, 10 June 1903, EWEP, fol. 131.


79. For an accounting detailing the public response to accounts of the Whitechapel murders, see Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 167–8. For the public response to discussions regarding the subject of marriage, see Bland, Banishing the Beast, pp. 30–32.


81. ‘High Court Proceedings’, Times, 17 March 1891.


83. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, The Decision in the Clitheroe Case, and Its Consequences: A Series of Five Letters (Manchester: Guardian Printing, 1891), p. 1. Over 100,000 copies of this pamphlet were eventually circulated; WEU, Final Report, p. 1. Regina v. Jackson did not categorise the act of rape in marriage as a crime per se, something that was not affected until the case of Regina v. R. on 23 October 1991, when a husband’s immunity from prosecution in this regard was abolished. Bland, Banishing the Beast, pp. 138, 338 n. 38.

84. WEU, Inaugural Report, pp. 1–2.

86. The four key principles of the WEU’s ideology were: equality of right and duty with men in all matters affecting the service of the community and the state; equality of opportunity for self-development by the education of the schools and of life; equality in industry by equal freedom of choice of career; and equality in marriage and in parental rights.

87. Pankhurst, My Own Story, p. 38.

88. WEU, Inaugural Report, p. 10.


92. Holton, Suffrage Days, p. 83; EWE to HM, 29 December 1895, EWEP, fol. 240; EWE to HM, 11 December 1892, EWEP, fol. 310.


94. Subsequently, under the leadership of Cozens and Atherley-Jones, the sub-committee morphed into the Parliamentary Committee for Women’s Suffrage (PCWS), the extreme ‘coterie’ identified by Helen Blackburn as having brought the wider suffrage movement into disrepute. Blackburn, Women’s Suffrage, pp. 202–3.

95. ‘Summary of the activities of the WEU’, 1895, EWEP, fol. 198.


99. As the law stood, a husband would still be liable to maintain his wife in the case of desertion, but had no grounds to divorce her. Frost, ‘A Shock to Marriage?’, p. 108.


102. EWE to HM, 25 May 1902, EWEP, fol. 301.

103. Wolstenholme Elmy, Decision in the Clitheroe Case, pp. 3–4.


105. Wolstenholme Elmy, Decision in the Clitheroe Case, pp. 7, 10.


112. The extent of Wolstenholme Elmy’s engagement with Mill’s ideals is illustrated when, in 1904, she collaborated with Dr Stanton Coit, émigré minister of South Place Chapel, to prepare an Introduction to a new edition of The Subjection of Women. All the papers from which Coit worked belonged to Wolstenholme Elmy. EWE to HM, 22 March 1890, EWEP, fol. 99; EWE to HM, 12 October 1904, EWEP, fol. 19. John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, ed. Stanton Coit (1869; London: Longmans, Green, 1906).


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116. [EWE], ‘Emancipation of Women’, p. 5, WEUP.
119. EWE, printed enclosure in a letter to HM, 31 May 1895, EWEP, fol. 197.
125. WEU, *Third Report*, Appendices. 1896 was the high point of the WEU’s membership, as suffragists of all groups worked in unison towards the suffrage bill presented to parliament in July 1897.
132. EWE to HM, 3 July 1892, EWEP, fol. 280.
133. EWE to HM, 16 August 1900, EWEP, fol. 113.
138. EWE to HM, 3 July 1892, EWEP, fol. 281.
141. EWE to HM, 25 February 1894, EWEP, fol. 86.
142. List of members, ‘Manchester Committee for the Enfranchisement of Women’, c.1867, M/50/1/9/1, Manchester Women’s Suffrage Collection, Manchester Central Library. Reproduced with permission.
143. EWE to HM, 21 June 1905, EWEP, fol. 123.
144. EWE to HM, 23 October 1905, EWEP, fol. 153.
146. EWE to HM, 5 February 1907, EWEP, fol. 49. Emphasis in original.
155. [EWE], ‘Emancipation of Women’, p. 4.

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156. EWE to HM, 30 October 1893, EWEP, fol. 54.
160. EWE to HM, 1 June 1903, EWEP, fol. 129. See also EWE to HM, 12 May 1903, EWEP, fol. 120.
161. EWE to HM, 28 September 1903, EWEP, fol. 172.
164. Wolstenholme Elmy includes this cutting from the *Review of Reviews* as an enclosure in a letter to McIlquham in May 1905. EWE to HM, 24 May 1905, EWEP, fols 119–21.
165. EWE to HM, 23 October 1905, EWEP, fol. 151.
166. EWE to HM, 23 October 1905, EWEP, fol. 153.
167. EWE to HM, 23 October 1905, EWEP, fol. 154.