

Suffragette

Jo Vellacott



Jo Vellacott is the author of Conscientious Objection: Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War (Spokesman £14.99). She has been to the cinema.

With the centenary of the women's vote coming around *Suffragette* is in the vanguard of an expected spate of related movies. In itself, this may be a Good Thing. However, just as I am uncomfortable with the direction taken by many movies and media bearing on the First World War, tending to glorify the sacrifice of life rather than bewail it as a terrible and unnecessary error, I am uneasy about the likelihood that suffrage movies and tales will grossly oversimplify the issue. And give all the credit to the *suffragettes*.

For those unfamiliar with the topic, it is useful to understand the difference between the terms 'suffragette' and 'suffragist'. Suffragette was a name given to, and proudly accepted by, the women who, like those featured in this film, engaged in or supported those engaged in civil disobedience and law-breaking, including property damage, arson and personal threats. Suffragist is a term for any supporter of the vote for women, and includes a much wider body of women and men who took a misnamed 'non-militant' approach.

Suffragists had been on the scene for a long time – even before the workers' Chartist movement of the mid nineteenth century. After 1867, suffragism was embodied mainly in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). True, by the beginning of the twentieth century this was predominantly a middle-class organisation, led mainly by comfortably-off women in southern England. True, too, progress was lamentably slow, though it was not unimportant that the demand for the

franchise was kept visible; and suffragists had also campaigned successfully on important issues of women's rights, achieving the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act. But – true in spades – the vote was overdue; and there were international indications of a groundswell. New Zealand women had won the vote in 1893, and Scandinavian countries and some US states were on the move.

Hopes had been pinned on the Liberal Party, but when they came into power in 1908, the leadership, especially the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, actively discouraged the campaign. The Pankhurst family had thrown down the gauntlet in 1905. It is telling evidence of the need to attract attention to the cause that when Christabel stood up at a Liberal Party gathering to demand the vote, this was seen as shockingly radical action. The increasingly dramatic demonstrations by members of the Pankhursts' new organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), initially had a dynamic effect, putting new life into the whole movement, but the WSPU had no patience with politicians and fell out with one party after another, and even with a number of individual Members of Parliament who supported suffrage. The organisation confined itself, in the main usefully, to publicising women's oppression and, much less usefully, to gaining attention by escalating its tactics to the brink of terrorism.

Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst kept a firm hold on the leadership, resisting every attempt to move towards an internally more democratic structure for the WSPU, leaving behind its initial working-class base, and retaining barely a few token working women in the inner circle. Because of its loose structure, however, it is clear that the membership and activities varied greatly from region to region. Sylvia Pankhurst, meanwhile, often at odds with her mother and sister, set up a truly working-class organization in the East End, the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS). Of the three, Sylvia it was who truly came to understand the oppression of voteless working-class women. The fictional heroine of this film would more likely have gained her political understanding from Sylvia than from Emmeline.

Initially, perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the earliest militant melodrama was the NUWSS, which took on new visibility and a new life, while – after a moment's hesitation – making a firm decision to stay with constitutional methods. The days of Mary Poppins and tea-drinking feminism were over. Between 1910 and 1914 the NUWSS built a solid base of support with individual MPs, carried on active conversations with

party leaders, provided and paid for well-trained assistance to suffrage candidates at election time, and reached out to women of all classes and occupations. It also increased its visibility by organising a peaceful march from all corners of the nation to London, and extended its network throughout the nation, in particular drawing in suffragists from the north and making their voice more effective by creating regional federations. The NUWSS also reformed its constitution, reaffirming a strong internal democratic structure and so ensuring both a voice and a practical education in democracy for all its members. At the same time, they built connections with the many men who also did not have the vote; even the somewhat skittish trade unions were brought on side.

Broad political developments did not favour the campaign: those in power were preoccupied first with limiting the power of the House of Lords, and then with the crises of Home Rule in Ireland, and industrial unrest at home. Although the Liberal Party had originally carried the hopes of the suffragists, the cause found little interest among the top leadership. Moreover, private members' bills were denied time to proceed and, in January 1913, Asquith's pledge to allow introduction of a women's suffrage amendment to a government reform bill was denied by the Speaker in sleazy circumstances that reflected on the whole government. But the constitutional suffragists rallied and in 1914, with the ground well laid, a commitment from the Labour Party, a world-wide trend at work, a growing common acceptance, and at worst a somewhat shamefaced acceptance of inevitability from a majority of individual MPs, the suffragists had much to hope for from the General Election due to be held in 1915, an election that would be postponed because of the war, with far-reaching consequences for franchise reform.

All this sets the context, far beyond the period in which this film is set. But already, by 1912, the outrages of the suffragettes were a thorn in the side of those seriously working for the vote. In response to each new outbreak, politicians who did not want to see women have the franchise, (including Asquith), responded smugly to any new outbreak – how, they would claim, could they give women the vote when they proved their unfitness by such bad behaviour?

The government did not just respond smugly, it reacted brutally, and this is where the film, which makes it clear that it does not claim to tell the whole story, comes into its own. It may be picky to point out that nearly all of the women involved directly in the more extreme breaches of the peace were middle class. Few working women went that route – they could not afford to, although doubtless many joined the supportive crowds. But

the depiction of women's legal helplessness and lack of civil rights, vividly shown here as provoking the move to militancy of the heroine, Maud Watt (Carey Mulligan), has the ring of truth. The stark facts of women's personal subjection in marriage, at work, and under the law are well brought out. (Indeed, today, when women have had the vote for a century, we are rightly embarrassed to find something sadly recognisable in the scene of sexual harassment at work.)

The government's brutal response is also historical. The force feeding scenes are based on first hand accounts, and might have been even more effective if they had been better set into the political context of the Cat and Mouse Act, passed in April 1913 to allow the prisons to release hunger-striking prisoners who might die in prison and re-arrest them when sufficiently recovered, in order to subject them to the same treatment again.

The courage of the women resisters stands out. I may be damned for saying that despite admiring the quality of physical courage, I do not accord such courage the right to trump every other virtue in any campaign. The vote was not won – nor were or will other good causes be won in any land with pretensions to democracy – by physical suffering or by frightening the government into compliance. The vote was won by the hard and long task of convincing a sufficient body of individuals both in power and in the wider public that change is right and necessary. A dash of shaming may help, but violent tactics are self-defeating. There are times when giving your life *to* a cause is of more value than risking your life *for* it.

I must admit that I went to see *Suffragette* carrying my own knowledge-based biases. I gladly concede that parts of what this film does show are worth showing and well told. The casting and acting are good, and the violent crowd scenes, shot from ground level, take the viewer uncomfortably into the action. There is also welcome nuance: to me, it seemed the leading policeman does not like what he is doing, and Maud's ultimately unsympathetic husband is not deliberately evil but rather is caught in a trap of incomprehension. I hope that the film will be widely watched, but I wish I had more confidence that there will be wide recognition that, as the filmmakers clearly state, *Suffragette* tells only a very small part of the story.

I find adventure and drama and example in the lives and work of the women who campaigned politically for the vote. Come on, film makers, step up to meet the challenge! What about a TV mini-series?

‘Wobblers’ and ‘Rats’

Catherine Marshall, parliamentary secretary to the NUWSS and leading strategist of the political suffragists, speaking to a general council of her organisation in October 1912 said: ‘unless our societies in the constituencies can counteract the effects of militancy, and keep steady the public opinion they have created in favour of women’s suffrage ... all the rest of our efforts will be of little avail. ... Militancy is not now an unfortunate accident. It is one of the definite obstacles – and the most formidable one – which we have got to set ourselves to surmount. It is the strongest weapon in the anti’s armoury. The reason why it is dangerous is not because it changes the opinion of MPs but it alienates support in the country and makes it possible for an MP to think he can vote against us without incurring any very serious displeasure on the part of his constituents. We must see to it that the public opinion we have created is steady enough, and enlightened enough to be proof against such setbacks. ...’ Marshall went on to outline a political strategy, involving sending delegates to every MP ‘as evidence of strong feeling in the country’, with particular attention paid to ‘wobblers’ and ‘rats’ (those who had reneged on previous pledges of support), and she gave pointers on how to approach MPs of the different parties.

From Liberal to Labour with Women’s Suffrage

The Story of Catherine Marshall

by Jo Vellacott

Spokesman will publish a paperback edition of this pertinent work later in 2016.

