# Australian Feminism and the British Militant Suffragettes*

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Although many feminists at the turn of the twentieth century were very strong nationalists, this did not mean either that they had no international interests or that they did not welcome others or become involved in the feminist activities of other nations. On the contrary, the British militant campaign in the years leading up to the First World War acted like a magnet to feminists from throughout the British Empire as well as to those from Europe and North America. Australian women in particular became intensely involved, and their engagement offers an interesting insight both into the history of Australian feminism and into some of the complex currents of international feminism in the early twentieth century. Although this involvement often took the form of a relatively brief and in many cases uncharacteristic episode, it was usually a very intense experience and had long-lasting and varied consequences.

The early enfranchisement of most Australian women meant that those feminists who visited London in the course of the militant campaign, between 1905 and 1914, already enjoyed the rights and privileges of citizens at home. As a result, the suffrage struggles in Britain had a very special meaning for Australian women, providing them with their first opportunity to turn the imperial tables as it were, and to offer their unfortunate British sisters help, guidance and advice. Vida Goldstein exemplified this privileged status when she visited England in 1911 as a guest of the militant Women's

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Social and Political Union (WSPU). She had gone, readers of her paper, the *Woman Voter*, were told:

> in response to repeated invitations … to assist the suffragettes in England to teach Englishmen, by militancy of speech and the logic of experience, that the road to chivalry is the road to justice.[1]

And Goldstein was introduced to English readers of the WSPU paper, *Votes for Women*, as 'the woman who has not only helped to carry the fight for the vote in her own state, but is one of the foremost leaders of the Australian women's movement, and is now helping her sisters in England to win their freedom.' [2]

Goldstein's visit was a busy one, during which she engaged in a number of different activities, giving speeches across the length and breadth of England and taking part in many suffrage demonstrations. She was active in other ways too, enjoying many of the activities that London offered its feminist community. She met the leaders of almost all the suffrage organisations, dined and made speeches at the Lyceum Club, and helped to establish the Australian and New Zealand Women Voters Committee, an organisation designed to help Antipodean women make their voice heard in imperial concerns.[3] This committee worked to support the suffrage struggle in Britain, but also kept in contact with suffrage and feminist groups throughout the empire.

Goldstein was perhaps the most prominent, but she was certainly not the only Australian woman to be in England at that time, nor was she the first to become involved in the British suffrage campaign. A large number of other Australian women found themselves in England between 1903 and 1914, travelling sometimes for pleasure and with family, but equally alone and in search of careers and opportunities[4] and were similarly involved. Alice Henry attended mass WSPU protest meetings in 1905 before moving to Chicago, where she became the organiser of the National Women's Trade Union League.[5] Dora Montefiore and Nellie Martel, both of whom had been born in Britain and then moved to Australia, returned and became actively involved in the WSPU.[6] Muriel Matters was perhaps the most spectacular of all, achieving fame in October 1908 by chaining herself to the iron grille of the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons—and distributing suffrage pamphlets from an airship soon after she was released from prison.[7] Although she was imprisoned in Holloway for one month, her actions did force the dividing grill to be permanently removed.[8] All of these women joined Goldstein in the Great Suffrage Procession of 17

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1 *Woman Voter*, no. 18, 6 April 1911.

2 *Woman Voter*, 12 May 1911, p. 532.

3 Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity*, London, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 105–138.

4 Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1996.

5 Diane Kirkby, *Alice Henry: the Power of Pen and Voice*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

6 Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian to Modern*, London, E. Archer, 1927.

7 The West Australian newspapers covered Matters' exploits quite extensively and she became something of a local celebrity. See the *Morning Herald*, 23 June 1908, p. 5; 30 October 1908, p. 5; 31 October 1908, p. 9; 3 November 1908, p. 2.

8 Carly Millar, 'The Making of a Feminist: Bessie Rischbieth Encounters the English Suffragettes', *Lilith*, no. 12, 2003.

June 1911, where she and Margaret Fisher carried the banner instructing England to 'Trust the women Mother as I have done'.

Even women who were such bitter opponents in later decades—the left-leaning Jessie Street and the very conservative Bessie Rischbieth—were swept into the militant campaigns. Street arrived in London at the age of 22 in 1911 and relished her capacity to become actively involved in meetings, processions, and the selling of newspapers. It was an exhilarating experience that made an indelible impression on her.[9] Rischbieth visited London a couple of years later in May 1913, and she too was immediately swept up in the British suffrage campaign. 'Oh!' she wrote to her sister, Olive Evans, 'this is an interesting place and an interesting age to live in.'[10] There were few Australian feminists who came away from their British experience untouched by the intensity of the suffrage struggle and by its many different symbolic meanings.

One of the things that is most interesting about these Australian women in London is that all of them became fascinated by and enmeshed in the militant campaigns of the Women's Social and Political Union, rather than joining the moderate campaigns of what is often referred to as the 'constitutional', or moderate, suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. For the older generation of Australian feminist campaigners, such as Rose Scott or Maybanke Anderson, it was the moderates who were natural allies and among whom they found colleagues and friends. But even those who had gone to London assuming that they would form a connection with the moderates found themselves swept up by the militants. Some became disillusioned by the WSPU, but generally they campaigned with the militant breakaway group, the Women's Freedom League, rather than with the moderates.

It seems clear that the close involvement of Australian women with the militant campaign was a result of the intense sense of drama that the militants always generated. For many of them, the suffrage struggle was an all-consuming affair in which passion, dedication, self sacrifice and even martyrdom were integrally connected to politics.[11] This attitude was in sharp contrast to the much smaller-scale suffrage campaigns that had developed in Australia. The drama of the militants, moreover, was evident not only in their public displays and demonstrations, but in their ideology, in their structure, and in their development and internal dynamics.

The British women's suffrage movement had begun in 1866—at a time when the Second Reform Act raised the question of an extension of the franchise to larger numbers of middle and working-class men, and thus raised again the issue of women's enfranchisement. The philosopher and feminist supporter, John Stuart Mill, was elected to Parliament in that year, and the first step in the British campaign involved the gaining of signatures for a petition to support women's suffrage that Mill presented to parliament.[12]

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[9] Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose*, Sydney, Australasian Book Society, 1966, p.45

[10] Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 3 July 1913, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004 /1/10, NLA.

[11] Sandra Stanley Holton, 'In Sorrowful Wrath: Suffrage Militant and the Romance of Feminism', in Harold Smith (ed.) *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, Aldershott, England, Elgar, 1990.

[12] See Jane Lewis, *Before the Vote was Won*, London, 1987; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, c 1780-1980* Oxford, 1998, pp. 115–123.

The mid-Victorian suffrage movement, despite the radicalism of its demand for equality for women, was a fairly cautious one. It was composed largely of middle and upper-middle class women and, in order to maximise support for the cause, every effort was made to shock the sensibilities of the British middle class as little as possible. Under Mill's stern guidance, the campaign worked through drawing room meetings held in respectable homes. When a public meeting was held, every effort was made to ensure that the platform was graced only with attractive and decorous women, who looked as if they enjoyed what were termed 'the normal pleasures of womanhood'. Anyone who looked strong minded was required to sit at the back of the hall. The British suffrage movement had a somewhat troubled history for all of this, and was subject to a number of divisions over questions about whether or not to protest at the regulation of prostitution through the Contagious Disease Acts, or about the differing views of supporters on major imperial questions including Irish Home Rule in the 1880s and the Anglo-Boer War in the late 1890s. There were questions also about how the suffrage movement related to the labour movement, especially in light of conflicting views between middle class feminists and trade unionists concerning how best to protect or to empower women workers. At the turn of the twentieth century unity had been restored, but there was a general sense that, although some women had become prominent in national politics over imperial questions, the suffrage struggle itself was rather in the doldrums.

The women's movement had made some progress in the United Kingdom as elsewhere: there had been marked improvements in women's education both with the establishment of academic secondary schools and with the admission of women to universities, and women had gained access to some professions—although not to all and not on the same terms as men. There had also been some moves to extend the legal rights of women in marriage and their custodial rights over their children once marriages came to an end.[13] The demand for women's suffrage, however, had advanced little in Britain and the suffrage campaign continued to be organised as it had been for several decades—through the setting up of local organisations to attract members and to call meetings, on the one hand, and through private members' bills in parliament, on the other. It received little publicity—indeed, it was of almost no interest to the press.

The British press and public, like the Australian women who found themselves in London at the time, were all galvanised with the advent of the militants. The primary militant organisation, the WSPU, was founded in Manchester in 1903. It began essentially as a breakaway from the labour movement: the Pankhursts left the Independent Labour Party and set up the WSPU when they discovered that women were not to be admitted to the new branch of the Independent Labour Party being set up in Manchester. From the start, the militants eschewed the genteel approach of the National union off Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). They regarded private members' bills as a waste of time and insisted that all campaigns had to be directed against the government in power. Their first public appearance, which involved the interruption of a campaign meeting being addressed by the Liberal Home Secretary,

[13] David Rubinstein, *Before the suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, NY, St Martins Press, 1986.

demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Christabel Pankhurst and her friend, Annie Kenney, interrupted the meeting to ask whether the Liberals would grant votes for women. The two women were rapidly hustled out of the hall, and spat at police and attempted to address the crowds as they were ejected. They were arrested for disturbing the peace, and their subsequent court appearance, and imprisonment for seven days, was extensively reported by the national press.

The publicity generated by this event made clear the importance of courting arrest, which allowed for dramatic speeches from the dock and the appalling spectacle of middle class women in gaols. After this first national success, the WSPU moved its headquarters to London, where they extended their range of activities. They continued to interrupt political—and especially campaign—meetings, but also arranged street corner speeches and meetings, suffrage caravans, marches and large scale public meetings and demonstrations. They showed considerable imaginative flair in their approach to campaigning, and injected drama into everything through the dramatic ways in which they played out their own sense of the brutality of women's oppression and the immediate need for their emancipation.

The older suffrage organisations benefited greatly from all the publicity generated by the WSPU, both in terms of donations and memberships. They, like the militants, began to engage in more and more public demonstrations, especially marches, pageants and vast public meetings. Women took to the streets in ever greater numbers making full use of colourful clothing, banners and music, serving, as Lisa Tickner has argued, to transform the face of political campaigning.[14] Indeed, it is clear from recent research that it was the moderate suffragists who benefited most from these developments, increasing hugely in numbers and in wealth, something which allowed them, amongst other things, to pay significant numbers of women, especially working class women, as full time suffrage organisers. All the British suffrage organisations showed a wonderful capacity both to create new approaches and to draw on labour traditions and on the Edwardian fascination with pageantry in their use of banners, costumes, music and special formations. They were fortunate to have teams of artists, actresses and musicians to draw upon, who greatly enlivened the spectacles they created.

Suffrage demonstrations of all kinds were very much costumed affairs.[15] Unlike their latter day counterparts, early twentieth century feminists regarded fashion as very important. Indeed, Christabel Pankhurst issued a stern injunction to her followers: 'Suffragettes must not be dowdy', and enjoined them to outfit themselves appropriately at Selfridges. Every suffrage or women's organisation seems to have developed a close relationship with a particular West End department store, which provided them with the appropriate apparel—and also offered sufficient advertising in the pages of their weekly papers to allow the development of a suffrage press. Even in their dress, however, one can see something of the differences between the moderate

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[14] Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1987; and Barbara Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and Sites of Suffrage, 1905–1938*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997.

[15] See W. Parkins, 'What to wear to a protest march: Identity politics and fashion in the suffragette movement', *Southern Review*, vol. 28, 1995, pp. 69–82.

and the militant suffrage organisations. Thus the moderates chose as their stores Derry and Thom, or Swan and Edgar, or Burberry—stores that provided sensible coats and skirts, and silk blouses or overcoats, 'serviceable attire at moderate prices'. This was the kind of garb which women normally wore in their daily round of shopping, work or social visits, and which, as the advertisements stressed, allowed for walking or free movement. The militants chose the rather more up-market Selfridges which offered a far more elegant array of clothes. Selfridges advertised regularly in the suffragette paper *Votes for Women*, featured the suffragette purple, white and green in its windows, and offered many different designs in white with delicate stripes of suffragette colours to wear to demonstrations.[16] The store went out of its way to court suffragette support—even donating a smart white military style costume to Flora Drummond, who was the chief marshal at the WSPU events.

What is particularly notable here is that the Selfridges garments usually chosen by suffragettes were not the hardy beige or brown outdoor coats and skirts, but rather white suits or delicate white tea gowns, of a kind normally worn indoors. The white garments emphasised the physical fragility of women and contrasted strongly with the heavy and dark clothing of male suits and jackets, enabling the suffragettes to play out in a visually dramatic form the confrontation between pure and ethereal femininity and gross brutal masculinity which underlay so much of their rhetoric and imagery. London streets offered the most fitting backdrop to this kind of demonstration.[17] The stress on femininity was evident in many activities of the suffragettes—embodied by the beautiful and often frail-looking Emmeline Pankhurst, who was both the leader and the most potent symbol of the movement.

The militants referred often to their sense of women as being threatened by male violence—and, from the very start, violence was evident in their campaign. Members of the WSPU were often subjected to brutality of a marked kind, being literally thrown out of meeting halls, and attacked by irate members of the public. In their demonstrations, some were subject to sexual assaults and possibly even rape from bystanders, and apparently on some occasions by police. This was something that seems never to have happened to the moderates. In some ways it seems clear why this was so. Those who organised the demonstrations of the NUWSS went out of their way to establish friendly relations with the local police forces and other relevant officials—something the militants never did. There have also been suggestions that the militants courted violence. Cicely Hamilton, for example, who was first attracted to and then left the WSPU, commented on the fury that she had felt when her views were never able to be heard, and suggested that the militants perfected a way of heckling that left no alternative for their opponents apart from violence.[18] But this is not a sufficient answer. One has a sense here that there was something about the militants that was deeply discomfiting to audiences, perhaps connected to their own sense that the fight for women's suffrage was a life and death struggle.[19] This approach was seen perhaps

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[16] The best discussion of this whole question is in Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre & Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[17] Barbara Caine, 'Feminism in London, c1850-1914', *Journal of Urban Studies*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2001.

[18] Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant,* London, J.M. Dent, 1935.

[19] Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, London, Virago, 1985.

in its most dramatic form in the death of Emily Wilding Davison, who ran in front of the King's horse at the Derby on 4 June 1913, suffering a fractured skull, from which she died five days later. Davison regarded herself, and was seen by her colleagues, as a martyr for whom death was the appropriate way to show the sufferings of womanhood. This death of course allowed for an immense funeral procession, which was held from Victoria Station to St George's Church in Bloomsbury, with Davison's coffin surrounded by thousands of suffragettes all clad in white. [20]

The extent to which violence was endemic to the militant cause was made even more evident in the ways that it increasingly became a feature of militant activity as the campaign developed. The militant campaign began in what is often thought of as a defensive way, and one in which the militants themselves were the victims of violence. But the militants soon escalated both their disruptiveness and the violence of their own activities, at the same time exposing themselves to greater violence. Thus in 1908, the militants began to engage in new activities including throwing acid at polling booths or breaking shop windows, or burning sporting fields and mail boxes. At much the same time, imprisoned suffragettes protested against the refusal to them of the status of first class political prisoners, by undertaking hunger strikes. The government responded by ordering them to be forcibly fed—an undertaking sometimes depicted as being very like rape. Forcible feeding led to renewed public outcry and increasingly to a sense of heroic martyrdom amongst the suffragettes themselves. In 1913, there was a further escalation with the start of an arson campaign.[21]

The moderation of Australian suffrage campaigns makes it very intriguing that Australian women were drawn so very strongly to the militants rather than the moderates. Older Australian women's rights pioneers often voiced negative responses to the militants. Maybanke Anderson had little time for the suffragette campaign, remarking that 'If you can't convince an Englishman by argument, you certainly won't do so by breaking his windows.' Rose Scott, too, harboured misgivings about militancy. Considering physical force to be 'the weapon of the Barbarian', in 1910 she wrote a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* condemning the actions of the suffragettes.[22] But this had no impact on their younger colleagues.

One of the things that clearly intrigued Australian women was the dramatic and extreme sense of sexual antagonism and conflict that was integral to the WSPU and the militant cause. Of course the women's suffrage movement in Australia had drawn attention to discrimination against women in the legal, economic and educational sphere, and to the ways in which women suffered from a sexual double standard and from domestic violence. Rose Scott certainly had a strong sense of the ways in which

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[20] Liz Stanley with Ann Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison: A Biographical Detective Story*, London, The Women's Press, 1988.

[21] For recent discussions and evaluations of the Pankhursts, militancy and the whole suffrage campaign, see Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts*, London, Allen Lane, 2001; June Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst: a Biography*, London, Routledge, 2002; and June Purvis and Sandra Holton (eds) *Votes for Women*, London, 2000.

[22] Jan Roberts, *Maybanke Anderson: Sex Suffrage & Social Reform*, Avalon, NSW, Ruskin Rowe Press, 1997, p. 96; and Judith Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 205–6.

marriage and heterosexual expectations oppressed women. However, there had been rather less emphasis on this amongst many feminists who sought rather to stress the need for a more general form of social transformation. Vida Goldstein, for example, rejected the very idea of sexual antagonism as an issue. With her simultaneous support for the labour movement and her concern about the oppression of women, she shared with other Australian feminists, like her friend Alice Henry, and with British socialist feminists, a belief that 'the woman movement and the labour movement must advance in combination.'[23] Looking back in later years, Goldstein characterised her early vision as one involving 'the complete equality of men and women, of absolute protection of children and young people, of peace and good will between nations, and of justice and economic security for all.' [24] Her enthusiasm for women's suffrage co-existed with her advocacy of a non-revolutionary form of socialism based on 'the collective ownership of the means of living'. Goldstein argued that it was class privilege, rather than male dominance, that maintained the oppression of women—and indeed, that the enfranchisement of women in Australia has depended largely on the generosity and support of working men.[25]

Exposure to London itself played an important role here. Goldstein certainly seems to have become much more intensely aware of the dangers which masculine sexual privilege and the whole sexual double standard posed for women in London than she had been in Melbourne. Like Bessie Rischbieth, she was forcibly struck by the extent of poverty and of prostitution in England. Rischbieth, who visited London in 1913, wrote to her sister of the 300 000 women in London, estimated to be earning two shillings per day. There were, she added:

> 25,000 people in London earning a living by the proceeds of the white slave traffic. That does not include the girl slaves but people earning money at this traffic and I forget how many small girls they reckon are outraged every month. Some of our laws relating to our state children and destitute mothers are far in advance of the laws here and I can see the influence of the women's vote in Australia.[26]

Goldstein, like Rischbieth, saw Australia as better than England in regard to the question of women's employment and their sexual enslavement. But the intensity of concern with these questions amongst English feminists had their effect in making her far more sensitive to the many cases of women's sexual abuse which occurred in Australia. Her discussions of the suffragettes place great emphasis on the importance of women's chivalry to other women and serve to illustrate her increasing concern both about the extent of women's sexual oppression and her growing sense that the emancipation of women had elements which could not be contained in a general

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[23] See Diane Kirkby, Alice Henry: *The Power of Pen and Voice. The Life of an Australian-American Labor Reformer*, Cambridge University Press, p. 81; Barbara Caine, 'Vida Goldstein and the English Militant Campaign,' *Women's History Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1993, pp. 363–376.

[24] Vida Goldstein, 'Towards a new social order', undated typescript, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/4/211, NLA. For Strong, see C.R. Badger, *The Reverend Charles Strong and the Australian Church*, Melbourne, 1971.

[25] Vida Goldstein, 'Socialism of Today—An Australian View', Nineteenth Century, vol. 62, 1907, p. 410.

[26] Bessie Rischbieth to Olive Evans, 3 July 1913, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/1/10, NLA.

program for greater social justice. The experience of cities like London or Liverpool brought her and other Australian feminists into contact with urban life and with social and sexual problems on a larger scale than they had ever known in Australia.

The issue of prostitution in particular and of sexual abuse in general was the subject of widespread comment in the daily and in the feminist press—as well as being discussed by conferences and public meetings run by a range of social purity and feminist organisations, most particularly by the National Council of Women. The passionate concern of Christabel Pankhurst with the consequences for women of male sexual promiscuity evident in *The Great Scourge* had not yet been published when Goldstein was in England, but there was constant discussion nonetheless of the ways in which male sexuality contributed to—even underlay—women's oppression. While these issues had certainly been canvassed in Australia, often in Goldstein's own papers, they were not as widely discussed either in the general press or as subjects of feminist debate as they were in England. Goldstein's depiction of the militant campaign tended to stress the martyrdom and the purity of the militants as they fought against sexual oppression and exploitation. In response to those who attacked the destruction of property perpetrated by the WSPU, especially in 1912, she insisted, in language strongly reminiscent of the Pankhursts, that 'we must remind critics that the choice for the suffragettes lies between broken windows and the broken lives of helpless women and children.'[27]

The dedication and the intensity of the suffragettes was also very attractive to Australian feminists, some of whom felt that their countrywomen were less engaged with their new rights and duties as enfranchised citizens than they should be. Very shortly after Goldstein arrived, she commented on her wish that some of her followers could be with her and be able 'to get an insight into the working of the offices at 25 Clement Inn and at 14 Charring Cross Road' (the headquarters of the WSPU). 'I wish too', she wrote, 'that all members of the WPA [the Women's Political Association] could be transhipped here so that they might learn what devotion to a great cause means. The spirit in these women is simply heroic.'[28]

The contrast between English and Australian feminism was of course particularly marked at this point, as Australian women were grappling with the inevitable fragmentation that followed the granting of the suffrage and the attempt to establish what a female vote or a woman citizen might mean, while their English counterparts were in the throes of the most intense stage of their suffrage campaign. In the 1920s, after the granting of partial women's suffrage, the English women's movement went through conflicts and faced problems considerably greater than those evident in Australia in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1911, however, Goldstein was struck by the concentrated energy of the English militant movement in contrast to her own organisation, the Victorian Women's Political Association. She explained:

> Concentration is the watchword of the WSPU and its leaders. They do not dissipate their energies taking up other questions besides the suffrage, and this is the rock which might endanger the future of the W.P.A. if it is not

[27] *Woman Voter*, 12 April 1912, p. 29.

[28] *Woman Voter*, no. 20, 1 June 1911, p. 2.

> careful ... The W.P.A. cannot become a strong self-supporting organisation without a *fighting platform*. [29]

Involvement in these activities was a risky business and those who undertook them often literally thought of themselves as devoting their life to the campaign. This sense of self-sacrifice and martyrdom was constantly reinforced by Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, who used millennial images, suggesting somehow that their fight for the vote was connected with a second coming or a complete transformation of humanity.

Although moderate British feminists were often attracted to and welcomed the militants in the early stages of their campaign, by 1908 when the WSPU turned to acts of violence and destruction, they distanced themselves very markedly from them. Some Australian women did too, but others did not. Bessie Rischbieth is an interesting case in point, and indeed is in some ways the most interesting case of an Australian entranced by the militants. Although a prominent feminist activist in the inter-period, Rischbieth had not seriously become involved in feminist campaigns before the First World War. At the time, she was quite well known, but as a prominent wealthy young Perth matron, who arranged her elegant dinner parties and dances, and had exquisite taste in clothes. She was also a public-spirited woman, interested in philanthropy. She was a foundation member of the Children's Protection Society in 1906, the National Council of Women (WA Branch) in 1911, a Vice-President of Women's Service Guild in 1909, and Honorary Secretary of the Kindergarten Union of Western Australia in 1911.

Initially, Rischbieth had applauded the dedicated work toward enfranchisement of the constitutional suffragists of the NUWSS and was equivocal about the WSPU stratagem. She readily acknowledged the momentum of the militant campaign. Indeed, the Women's Service Guild even sent a message of support and sympathy to the WSPU in 1910. But she expressed apprehension as to their direction: 'of course the militants are going strong and will be going stronger', she wrote, but 'I really think there will be murder before things get much further.' Nor could she condone the violent conduct and lawlessness of the WSPU, bemoaning the fact that 'nothing but militant methods are reported in the English Press. All the great Constitutional Societies and the magnificent educational work they are doing lies unreported.'[30]

Rischbieth's attitude changed markedly when she found herself in London in 1913. She was there accompanying her husband, who had business interests in Britain, and had originally intended to spend her time studying developments in kindergartens. Soon, however, she found herself entirely caught up in the suffrage struggle and other feminist activities. Her frequent letters to her sister detail the activities and the fate of the Pankhursts and the WSPU to the exclusion of almost anything else.

The year of Rischbieth's visit was a dramatic one in the suffrage world. The WSPU had declared a truce in 1912, while the government considered a 'conciliation bill' that promised a measure of women's suffrage. The failure of the third Conciliation Bill in March 1912 and then the withdrawal of the Reform Bill in January 1913 led to a

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[29] *Woman Voter*, no. 22, 1 Aug 1911, p. 1 (italics in original).

[30] Quoted in Millar, op. cit.

resumption of full-scale arson assaults. In the face of its continued refusal to grant the suffragettes the status of political prisoners, the government faced fierce criticism over its forcible feeding policy. It wanted to prevent any suffragettes from dying in prison from hunger striking, something that would give the movement both martyrs and more publicity, thus the Asquith Government enacted the Cat and Mouse Act (Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act). The Act was designed to keep suffragette prisoners alive by temporarily releasing them on condition that they did not undertake any suffrage agitation, and then subsequently re-arresting them to serve out their sentence when they were deemed well. Emmeline Pankhurst, who assumed full responsibility for WSPU militancy, was continually in and out of prison and in a constant state of ill health due to perpetual hunger striking during this time.

Bessie Rischbieth attended a meeting of the WSPU shortly after Emmeline Pankhurst was released from prison where she had been on a hunger strike. I 'was at the weekly meeting at Pavilion on Monday when Mrs. Pankhurst & Annie Kenny came on to the platform', she wrote to her sister:

> I can tell you it was a day in a life time. The place was packed out and the enthusiasm enormous of both men & women. Annie Kenny was the first to come forward looking like a shadow. She is like a lovely spirit, quite small and indomitable courage. Mrs. Pankhurst [was] so weak and ill, but immediately she got going she was magnificent. I don't wonder she is able to lead as she does. None of her pictures do her the slightest likeness. Her face is so soft & full of soul. Really as I listened I felt my back-bone growing longer, as though you gained courage and freedom from her. There is no doubt this movement is the real thing from the very opposition it is arousing. To me they were both like two lovely spirits standing there. You can imagine the audience. They sent up cheer after cheer.[31]

'The Cat & Mouse Bill,' Rischbieth told her sister,

> is considered by all thinking folk to be the most scandalous bill & quite an arbitrary one. They let a man out last week after only having served four months out of nine of his time. He was imprisoned for assaulting three little girls under fourteen & is out because his health is suffering. Under the Cat & Mouse Bill as applied to the suffragettes he would have to go into Hospital & get well & then go back, but no.[32]

Like Goldstein, Rischbieth came more and more to echo the views and to use the language of the militants. She told her sister: 'Mrs. Pankhurst was arrested on leaving the Hospital & has again been committed for Holloway. She is very very ill & there is hardly any hope. If she dies in prison the responsibility rests with the government, but they think it likely that she will be taken out just to save their skins, as they did in the case of her sister.'

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[31] Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004, NLA.

[32] ibid.

Almost despite herself, Rischbieth's initially guarded and somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the militant suffragettes had developed into a stance of whole-hearted endorsement. The animated tenor of her letters home reflects this change: 'The Government are hiding behind the militant methods and break all their promises and have been most dishonourable.' She hailed Emmeline Pankhurst a 'living miracle', censuring the government and the 'torture it was meeting [sic] out to these women not punishment but absolute torture.' Of course, some of Rischbieth's sympathy for suffragette prisoners, and empathy with their plight, can be attributed to her interest in and work for women's welfare. By this stage, however, Rischbieth was so taken with the militants that she even referred to the recent birth of her niece, Mary Evans, as 'the arrival of the little suffragette.' Occasionally, she remembered that her correspondents were not privy to her own feelings and experiences. 'Oh, well you will think I am dotty,' she laughingly told her sister after writing yet another impassioned condemnation of the government's 'infamous' and 'disgraceful' Cat and Mouse Act.

Although Rischbieth did not write much about this aspect of the suffrage campaign, other Australian women were also caught up in another aspect of the militant drama: the constant internal tensions and divisions that served as a counterpart to the public spectacle, as one after another, individuals and groups, seen by the Pankhursts as critical of their approach, were either forced out or resigned. The 1907 formation of the Women's Freedom League (WFL) by a breakaway group of socialist women, led by Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Grieg, constituted the first major split. The Pankhursts' autocratic style, as well as their support for women's franchise on the same terms accorded to men (thus entailing a property qualification) was the major reason. The WFL sought a more democratic organisation as well as full adult suffrage without qualifications. This signalled the narrower demands of the WSPU, as well as indicating the ever more conservative direction of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhursts' politics.

Many Australian women became involved in the internecine battles of the militant suffragettes. Some, like Dora Montefiore and Muriel Matters, rejected the Pankhurst approach, and several others went with the WFL. But some remained entranced by the WSPU, which became more and more like a military organisation in its demand for obedience and self-sacrifice. With a sense of awe, Jessie Street recalled the WSPU as operating like 'an army during active service'. Members 'pledged themselves to carry out any instructions they received. They were in the category of guerrilla fighters.'[33] In 1912 the Pankhursts even succeeded in expelling the Pethick-Lawrences, two of their most devoted members, when they questioned the use of violence. Katherine Susannah Prichard related the importance of suffragette allegiances in her autobiography: 'Whether you were a Peth or a Pank became the burning question. I was a Peth ... It does seem awful altogether the state of affairs here, & the Government are absolutely to blame.'[34] Rischbeith, by contrast, although unknown to any of the leaders of the WSPU, remained definitely a 'Pank'. Everyone was involved in some form or another in this deeply felt emotional drama—and many insisted in letters and memoirs that,

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[33] Jessie Street, *Truth or Repose*, Sydney, Australasian Book Society, 1966.

[34] Katherine Susannah Prichard, *Child of the Hurricane: an Autobiography*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1963, p. 184.

although their involvement in the militant campaign was short-lived, it had changed their lives.

The love affair between most Australian women and the British militants had come to an end in 1914—when indeed militancy itself ceased. When the First World War began in August in 1914, the Pankhursts immediately ceased their suffrage activity, dedicating themselves to supporting the British government with all the vehemence they had previously applied to fighting for the vote. This was the last straw for Vida Goldstein, who had already been dismayed by the Pankhursts swing towards the right in politics—and was appalled by the WSPU jingoistic support of the British war effort. As a pacifist, Goldstein opposed the war in general and conscription in particular—discovering in her pacifist activities some of the male violence and brutality that had been so central a part of militant rhetoric.

Ironically, it was the most conservative of Australian women, Bessie Rischbieth, who remained most devoted to the militants. It was she too for whom the consequences of that brief moment in Britain were most visible. As a strong supporter both of the war effort and of conscription, Rischbieth felt none of Goldstein's sense of distance from the Pankhursts. On the contrary, she returned to Perth very much enthused with the need to campaign for social reform and with a stronger sense than she had had before of the need to promote equal citizenship between men and women. Indeed, her time in London had made Rischbieth much more self-consciously into a feminist, as was made evident in her role in the Australian Federation of Women Societies for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, founded in 1921 (later the Australian Federation of Women Voters). On her return home, she ensured the affiliation of the Women's Service Guild(s) with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (soon to become the International Alliance of Women). She also began to edit *Dawn*, the monthly organ of the Women's Service Guild and the AFWV. Rischbieth's devotion and dedication to the WSPU was evident also in her interest in keeping alive the history of the militant campaign and in her attempts to collect suffragette memorabilia and to have it exhibited in Australia.[35]

The question that still remains to be answered centres on whether and to what extent the involvement of Australian women in the militant campaign—apart from Rischbieth—had a continuing impact on the individual women involved and on the broader history of Australian feminism. This is a hard question to answer in any definitive way, as the letters and the recollections of the women who were in London deal with the intensity of the moment, rather than with any lingering or permanent consequences. It is clear, moreover, that those women who were active in the next phase of Australian feminism, in the 1920s, 30s and 40s in particular, were unlike the militants, not only in their approach to campaign strategies, but also in their goals and outlooks. While the militant WSPU became more and more conservative in its political outlook and narrower in its aims, as it relinquished any ties with the labour movement and discouraged any support from working class women, many Australian feminists in this period were notable for their broad interest in social questions, their concern with Aboriginal rights, and particularly with the rights of mothers to care for

[35] English Suffragette Collection, Rischbieth Papers, MS 2004/3, NLA.

and maintain their own children, and for their internationalism.[36] Indeed, if one were to look for direct links between the time in London and the later feminist interests of Australian women, one would focus more closely on the concerns about imperial and international questions that were articulated in the Lyceum Club and in the Australian and New Zealand Committee of Women Voters. Rischbieth remained very active in that organisation, especially in its later incarnation as the British Commonwealth League. She was involved in the Pan-Pacific Women Association and, like Jessie Street, also with the League of Nations.

Nonetheless, the impact of their militant moment remained important and, arguably, played a significant role in the later development of Australian feminism. As Marilyn Lake has argued, the pattern of Australian feminism was unique.[37] While feminists in Britain and the United States dedicated themselves for decades to the suffrage struggle, they faced a period of exhaustion and inertia when suffrage was gained. Two generations had devoted their lives to the struggle, but there was no new one to take up the baton when citizenship was granted. Australia was quite different. After a relatively brief suffrage campaign, Australian feminism flowered once the vote was won. The period from 1910 to 1950 is, in Lake's words, the golden age of Australian feminism, and a period which saw the establishment of innumerable feminist organisations and many different campaigns for better welfare for women and children, for maternal rights and for the wider participation of women in the social and legal world.

Rose Scott and her fellow pioneers withdrew from active engagement and many of them died in the decade after the granting of suffrage. Goldstein was probably the last, and she gave up any feminist activity after the War. The inter-war period thus saw a new generation of women coming to the fore. Rischbieth and Jessie Street were the most prominent, but there were many others as well, some of whom, like Rischbieth and Street, had gained their first taste of feminism in the course of the militant campaign. Thus the imperial wheel turned full circle as those who went to London to offer their British sisters the benefits of their status as citizens, found their feminist interests and commitment developed or revived there, in the course of the militant campaign—and came home to devise a new feminist program and platform that was not seen anywhere else.

**Question —** Regarding the suffrage colours, you have indicated that the Australian women who were most prominent in the militant campaign in London belonged to the Women's Freedom League, rather than the Women's Social and Political Union, so their colours were white, gold and green, not purple, white and green. On the other hand, quite soon the purple, white and green were adopted in Australia, and I had

[36] Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism*, St Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1999; Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights, 1919-1939*, Carlton South, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 2000.

[37] Lake, *Getting Equal*, op. cit.

assumed this was because of Vida Goldstein and the fact that she used the colours in her own election campaigns in 1913. But your mention of Bessie Rischbieth's continuing relationship with the Pankhursts made me wonder whether perhaps Bessie Rischbieth might have been equally responsible for the fact that Australian feminists cottoned on to white, purple and green and not the other kinds of militant suffrage colours which they had been more identified with in London.

Another issue is about Mahatma Gandhi. I think Dale Spender taught a number of us that Mahatma Gandhi had been very influenced by his observation of the strategy of non-violent direct action civil disobedience when he was in London in 1906–7. But later, when he returned to London just before the First World War, he was quite distressed at the degree of violence against property which was then going on in the militant campaign. So at that stage he really distanced himself from any influence that the militants might have had on the campaign strategy that he was going to be associated with, Satyagraha, and he also then stressed much more the Hindu roots of that. And I wondered what has emerged from your own research in relation to this vexed question of the degree to which Satyagraha directly came about because of the militants' campaign.

**Barbara Caine —** I would think that the Australian adoption of the colours has to do with Goldstein rather than Rischbieth. Rischbieth is very interesting because she collected an enormous amount of suffragette memorabilia, and her collection has extraordinary artefacts. For example, with the boxes of her papers in the National Library she was terribly keen to set up museum displays of the militants. However that was slightly later, in the 1920s, whereas it seems to me that Goldstein began to use the colours almost immediately. So I would think that that was where that came from.

There is a very interesting research project on Gandhi being undertaken at the moment, looking at the ways in which he connects with different movements in London such as non-violence, vegetarianism, and the kind of coalition of different groups that become part of the support groups that he finds, who are opposed to Empire on the one hand, and anti-violence on the other. I don't think there is anything beyond the point you have already made, that initially the idea of large scale non-violent demonstrations is part of what he takes up. But Gandhi's connection with issues about women is always a very complicated one, and in some ways the idea of the simplicity of women, the suffering of women, is something that is immensely attractive to him—but it clearly ceases to be so when women themselves are engaged in any kind of violence.

**Question —** What counter-forces were generated by the militancy of WSPU and the suffragette movement generally? The Gandhi question has raised one aspect of this, and I was wondering if there were other counter-forces, and if there were, what directions they took?

**Barbara Caine —** Do you mean counter-forces in the sense of seeking pacific solutions? There has been a long-standing debate about Britain in the years before the First World War—that it was almost on the brink of a civil war, and that in some ways the escalation of suffrage violence came at the same time as increasing trade

union violence and Irish rebellion. There was a very popular book called *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, that argues that these three things together really threatened the nature of British democracy. I think in the last few decades people have come to believe that it was not really as fundamental as that, but I certainly think there was a very strong sense of extreme discontent with the prevailing enfranchisement system and the prevailing approach to government policy that fed into making the militant campaign in some ways more violent.

There was an argument often put forward by the militants that male political opponents were treated as first class misdemeanants, whereas members of the Women's Social and Political Union were just ordinary common criminals. That was one of the reasons for the hunger striking, and so one can see quite clearly, in one sense, the things that fermented the violence. If one looks within the suffrage movement, the other thing that happens here is that the other larger suffrage groups distanced themselves more and more from this kind of militant campaign and wanted to work more clearly through their old quiet means—though meetings with individual members of parliament, through a very orderly procedure, through wanting to demonstrate, as they keep saying, that women have the capacity to exercise the vote and that they have the skills and judgement that is required of citizenship.

**Question —** Could you say a little more about the social and economic background of the Australian feminists? I assume those who went to London were relatively affluent? They did have some link with the Labour Party in London, and you have spoken about that, but what about the Australian feminist movement in Australia—was that essentially a movement of the more well-to-do, or did it cross different classes?

**Barbara Caine —** I think a little bit of both. It was largely a middle-class movement at that stage. The Australian suffrage movement always had quite strong connections with the trade union movements, so there were always significant numbers of women who were involved in the labour and trade union movements, like the Golding sisters in New South Wales.

I am not sure that anyone has actually done research on that question, but certainly the feminists who were more prominent and the ones who were better known tended to be middle and upper middle-class women.

I think one of the things that quite a lot of feminists in that pre-World War One period would have wanted to argue was that they were talking on behalf of all women, and that one of the things that they were trying to do was to reduce the sense of division. Sometimes, of course, there were enormous differences in experience and in access to opportunity and way of life, but many feminists—and Goldstein is one of them—would have seen themselves as wanting to bridge that gap and to have an effect on working women and working men, as well as middle class women. So yes, the majority were middle and upper-middle class women, but they always had close ties with working class women.

The Australian movement was less wealthy than the British movement, and it is interesting that the British moderate movement—much less than the militants—in the

years after 1905–6 actually supported quite a large number of working-class women to work amongst working-class communities. There were more women in Britain than in Australia who left the trade union movement because they felt it neglected women's rights, and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies had quite considerable numbers of these women on their payroll, getting them to try and build up support for the suffrage cause. The Australian movement, as far as I am aware, never actually had the resources to engage in that kind of activity. But the links were certainly there.

**Question —** I was wondering about the philosophy by which the militant British suffragettes reconciled their campaign for suffrage as a remedy against male violence in society, with the violence of their own campaign?

**Barbara Caine —** That's a really interesting question. It is a hard one to answer. In one sense it is like the demonstration that says 'From the Prison to the Vote', which is a campaign of lawlessness in order to get the right to be legislators and law-makers.

Certainly when it began, the Women's Social and Political Union was a kind of left-of-centre group, really. They wanted both political change and social and economic change. I think that one of the things that happens—and there is quite a lot of recent research that has looked at this—is that, increasingly, they began to become a kind of millenialist organisation. Christabel Pankhurst talks about her mother as if she's Christ: 'My mother has come amongst you to raise you up'. I think there is a point at which another sort of political philosophy or political approach gives way to the idea that the vote in and of itself will be a kind of transforming act that will change society in a major new way. And there is no theoretical underpinning of that, but it is absolutely a religious kind of faith.