

## 2010 Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture

**Essay based on the Eighth Lecture in the series sponsored by  
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### **Sylvia Pankhurst in the context of her radical family background**

#### *Others*

Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) was a gifted artist, and a leading protagonist in the fight for women's right to vote in Parliamentary elections. Sylvia was born in Manchester. She was the child of a politically radical family; that is, a family dedicated to change for public good – for *others* – regardless of how unpopular members' views might be with established authority. Both Sylvia's paternal and maternal sets of grandparents as well as her parents took an active interest in public affairs. The concept of putting the greater good before self-interest was the underpinning of Sylvia's life as it was for the many women – and men – who together wrought the early twentieth century women's revolution.

This analysis attempts to set Sylvia the person in context as both the victim and beneficiary of the radical ethos, in what must be one of the most turbulent eras in human history. For brevity, much of the complex Sylvia story must be excluded. The most intriguing aspect of Sylvia's tumultuous tale is in its ending.

Sylvia's parents Emmeline (1858-1928) and doctor of law and barrister Richard Marsden Pankhurst (1835-1898) seem to have been driven by society's needs, never sparing time for their own. Sylvia recalled with delight the stories that Dr Pankhurst told his two elder daughters when they were toddlers, but with Parliamentary elections to be fought as his political career developed it is doubtful whether there was much time to spare for his later daughter and son.

Most striking is the way in which Sylvia's parents dealt with grief. In the grip of the most terrible tragedies they set personal feelings aside and kept on working for the good of others. The father's oft-repeated injunction to his children, 'If you do not grow up to help other people you will not have been worth the upbringing!' left Sylvia with a sense that she was destined to serve the commonweal. How typical was Sylvia's upbringing compared with that of daughters in other radical households?

## The Evans Bell connection

Contemporaneous with Dr R.M. Pankhurst's family was the radical Evans Bell family of Kensington in London. The two families were to become interlinked through having interests and experiencing events in common. The early lives of Evans Bell daughter Ernestine and Pankhurst daughter Sylvia were to follow much the same course. Particularly striking is the way in which, in both cases, death of the father was followed by an opportunity to study art; and in both cases mutual radical network friends Frederic Shields and Charles Rowley were involved.

In 1866 Major Thomas Evans Bell (1825-1877) had retired early from the Indian army on half pay in order to write political treatises that would help the people of India, but not his own finances. Aged forty-one the scholarly army officer and diplomat married classical actress and Royal Academy of Music graduate Emily Magnus (c.1839-1893), fourteen years his junior but a fellow Freethinker and radical.

The new Mrs Emily Evans Bell was one of 1,499 courageous women who signed the first major petition requesting votes for women. The petition was initiated by artist Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891) and signatures were collected by the Kensington Society. Sympathetic Member of Parliament John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) presented the petition to the all-male House of Commons. It was greeted with derision. Male *coverture* of women's interests was revealed for the sham it was. This marked the beginning of sustained agitation by women to establish equal voting rights and citizenship with men.

Mr and Mrs Evans Bell supported radical secularist George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) and the Robert Owen Co-operative movement. They contributed to funds raised to help General Guiseppe Garibaldi and his patriot army to liberate the separate states of Italy from French and Austrian occupation. They believed that a strong, united Italy was necessary to maintain the balance of power in Europe.

In 1891 Emily Evans Bell and her daughter Ernestine canvassed votes for Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian member to take his seat in the British House of Commons. Other supporters were socialists Keir Hardy and John Burns.

From the 1870s Emily and Thomas Evans Bell, and doctor of law and barrister Richard Marsden Pankhurst, served together on the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage. In the 1860s Dr Pankhurst had drafted the first women's suffrage bill (unsuccessful) and the amendment moved by radical MP Jacob Bright that successfully granted women the franchise in municipal elections. The name of Pankhurst and the cause of women's suffrage were firmly linked long before the founding of the Women's Social and Political Union.

Mutual friends of the Evans Bell and Pankhurst families included fringe Pre-Raphaelite artist Frederic Shields (1833-1911) and picture framer Charles Rowley (1839-1933) who was active in establishing the Manchester Municipal Art Gallery.

## Five Pankhurst off-spring and fate

Aged forty-four, in 1879 Dr Pankhurst wed Emmeline Goulden, twenty-three years his junior in years, but his soul-mate in radical political orientation. As a child Emmeline was aware of working class poverty surrounding her more fortunate middle class family. The eldest daughter with responsibility for younger siblings, Emmeline seems to have inherited a sense of authority and privilege which, as an adult, she felt compelled to justify in the wider world through political activism.

The marriage quickly produced a family of three daughters: Christabel (1880-1958), Sylvia (1882-1960) and Adela (1885-1961); and two sons, Frank (1884-1888) and Harry (1889-1910). Each of the first three Pankhurst babes arrived sensibly at least eighteen months apart. As an eldest daughter herself, Emmeline would naturally relate most strongly to her first-born, Christabel, who arrived on 22 September 1880. The first baby usually benefits from the most individual parental attention, before siblings cause displacement.

Sylvia was born second, on 5 May 1882. In 1883 Dr Pankhurst unsuccessfully (and expensively for the family) stood as an independent candidate in a local Manchester by-election, mainly to publicise his radical ideas including votes for women. He was publicly supported by again-pregnant wife, Emmeline. Under the circumstances, Sylvia is unlikely to have enjoyed much early parental bonding.

The third baby, Frank, was born on 27 February 1884. The fourth, Adela, arrived only sixteen months after her brother on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1885. The family had just moved house in Manchester. Pregnancy with Adela adversely affected Emmeline's health at a time when Dr Richard Marsden Pankhurst was standing for election again as a radical, in London's dockside constituency of Rotherhithe. Emmeline needed to travel to be by her husband's side. Dr Pankhurst's political opponent was not above using slander to even the odds by implying that Pankhurst was an atheist unbeliever rather than an agnostic questioner. Emmeline was furious. The election was lost.

From birth Adela proved physically delicate. She needed splints on her legs to strengthen them until she was three years old. Toddler Frank must have been catapulted into early independence by her needs. The normal mild jealousy experienced by displaced older siblings could have been exacerbated by the extra coddling lavished by aunts and uncles on the high-dependency youngest.

Around 1887 the Pankhursts moved to London in the hope of establishing a broader base for Dr Pankhurst's political influence. Fired by her husband's socialist idealism and her own romantic, French Revolution vision of herself as one born on 14<sup>th</sup> July, anniversary of the triumphant *storming of the Bastille Day* in which women took part, Emmeline seems to have felt impervious to limitations.

Emmeline leased a house and opened a *fancy goods* shop, *Emmerson's*, in the vain hope of contributing to the family income. Dr Pankhurst was obliged to spend the working week away in Manchester, often with Emmeline by his side. Much faith had to be placed in servants to run the London household and to raise the children under the watchful eye of Emmeline's obliging younger sister Mary. Increased living expenses posed an additional strain on stretched family finance. Then the unthinkable happened.

On 11 Sept 1888 Frank, the beloved boy child, died suddenly of diphtheria, contracted through faulty drains at the back of the house. He was four years old. Emmeline was distraught with grief. According to Sylvia's later recollection in her book, *The Suffragette Movement*, Emmeline seems emotionally to have withdrawn from her remaining children at this time. Sensitive Sylvia felt that her own death would have been preferable to that of Frank's; that as one of three daughters she was expendable whereas the sole boy child was not.<sup>i</sup> Christabel, in her book *Unshackled*, noted that a deep sadness afflicted their father for the rest of his life.<sup>ii</sup> It may have been at this point that three-year-old Adela, with her physical needs, innocently alienated her grieving family. The leg-strengthening splints were removed. Adela thenceforth had to stand unaided. Christabel and Sylvia had known, loved and looked after Frank since birth. They could turn to each other for comfort. The tragic death of Frank could have been a watershed in family life that left Adela alone on the wrong side of his birth.

According to her biographer in *Adela Pankhurst, the wayward suffragette*, Adela in later life recalled having viewed her mother with a mixture of love and fear and her father as a distant authority figure of whom she was terrified.<sup>iii</sup> The care-worn couple Adela knew were not the same proud, happy parents who had presided over the earliest years of Christabel and Sylvia's lives.

### **Cause and effect**

Adela as an adult served as organiser for the WSPU in Sheffield and in other areas of Britain but always felt her family was critical of her efforts. In 1914 Adela, with her Mother's blessing, answered the call to help women in Australia to consolidate their early voting rights granted in 1902. Distance from family helped Adela to develop her own unique political identity.

Confident Christabel seems to have donned the mantle of the lost boy-child, Frank, and inherited her parents' high expectations for his future. As an adult she followed in the footsteps of her father, matriculating in law with honours. This was in spite of the unorthodox home-based early education usual for girl children. Lack of formal education made it difficult for female students successfully to compete with male colleagues. Despite her achievement, as a female Christabel was excluded from entering the profession of lawyer. Instead she assumed her father's role as women's suffrage political

strategist and became her mother's somewhat ruthless adviser in the militant Votes for Women campaign. Sibling leadership led to suffrage leadership.

Between the births of Sylvia and Adela, the young Pankhurst family, stretched financially, had resided with Emmeline's parents. Emmeline's father Robert Goulden was partner and manager of a cotton printing works. He had been able to provide his wife and ten children with a spacious house and garden.

Emmeline, somewhat unrealistically for one of ten children, harboured expectations that when she married her father would provide her with economic independence. Her father could not. Resentment and financial desperation alienated Emmeline from seemingly otherwise supportive parents. Father and daughter parted under a cloud which the subsequent death of her son Frank would have done nothing to dispel.

On 7<sup>th</sup> July 1889 Emmeline gave birth to another son, Harry. Almost concurrently Emmeline, Richard and others were involved in the formation of the Women's Franchise League dedicated to upholding, whenever women's suffrage should be granted, the right of married women to vote alongside single women and widows. Other suffrage pressure groups at that time, desperate to wedge open the door to woman suffrage on any terms, had *pro tem* agreed to *coverture* of married women by the husband's vote.

Sylvia, then seven, formed a special bond with new baby Harry, lavishing on him the love that life's demands made it impossible for their mother to give. Emmeline packed so much into her life that it is easy to forget she married at twenty-one and gave birth to five children as well as accomplishing much else within a decade. British women had before them the invincible example of Queen Victoria who almost incidentally gave birth to nine children whilst presiding over an empire.

### **Evans Bell family tragedy**

In the meantime in London, Emily Evans Bell continued to practice her profession of classical actress and teacher of elocution as a necessary supplement to the family income. Emily believed implicitly in Thomas and Thomas believed it was his mission to nurture the policy of granting independence to India through his writing and by Parliamentary lobbying.

Thomas and Emily had two daughters: little Emily called Mynie (1869 -1878) and Ernestine called Tina (1871-1959). The family took up residence in Barnes, London, close to like-minded radical Henry Davis Pochin (1824-1895), former mayor of Salford and MP for Stafford, and his wife Agnes (1825-1908). Agnes had been the first woman to advocate votes for women from a public platform, that of Manchester's Free Trade Hall in 1868.

Inadequate drainage in the Barnes area at the time led to an outbreak of typhoid. Nine-year-old Mynie, the elder Evans Bell daughter, died within sixteen days of contracting the disease. Seven-year-old Tina had also succumbed and only just survived. The devastated Evans Bell family moved back to Kensington. The Pochins moved to Bodnant in Wales.

Mynie's parents never recovered from their loss. According to Tina Bell's daughter, Ernestine was left with a life-long feeling of inferiority and guilt that she, the less favoured of the two daughters, had survived when her sister, more talented and highly regarded in every way, had perished. As if in confirmation, Mynie's gravestone in Brompton cemetery reads, 'Our noble, intelligent, beautiful child died 1878 aged 9 years, 2 months, and 8 days.'

After earlier home tutoring by a governess, Ernestine's attendance record at Notting Hill High School for Girls, when she was fourteen, is poor. The reason given in school records is ill health. The health in question may have been that of her beloved father who was dying of cancer. Tina's help would have been needed at home. Her mother Emily was in business as a teacher of elocution with rooms at the Albert Hall, striving to make ends meet for her family. Emily adopted the professional name *Mrs Fairfax* in deference to her intellectual husband whom she likened to Cromwell's general, Thomas Fairfax, about whom it was said, 'for others, not himself, he fought'. When Thomas Evans Bell died in 1887, Emily proudly refused charity offered by friends. By age twenty-one, Ernestine was a double orphan.

Emily was laid to rest at Brompton with her late husband and daughter Mynie. At the grave-side George Jacob Holyoake declared, '...were everyone to whom she did some service, or whose condition she sought to improve, to bring a blossom to the grave, she would sleep beneath a mountain of flowers'.

Emily's dying words, quoted in her obituary published in *The Reasoner* were, 'Tina my child, do thy work well.' That meant, work for women's suffrage. Tina Bell was now alone in the world. Her life had been dominated by the desire to please her parents, as Tina strove to compensate for the loss of Mynie. Emily, in her will, commends her daughter to the guardianship of Professor William Ayrton, physicist and father of Tina's close friend Edith. The widowed professor's second wife, Hertha, was a militant suffrage campaigner.

### **Creating a career in art**

From childhood, Ernestine Evans Bell had been taught to draw by family friend Frederic Shields, who moved from Manchester to London. She was awarded a place to study at the South Kensington School of Art and later at the progressive Slade School. At the unisex Slade, women were permitted to attend life classes to practise drawing the male nude. Several other female students of Ernestine's intake also were orphans. Their

future livelihoods depended on competing in the market place with flamboyant male fellow-students like Augustus John. Hedging her bets on earning a living, at night Tina trained as a silversmith and enameller at Finsbury Technical College under Alexander Fisher (1864-1936). Art-enamelling was an ancient and almost forgotten craft in Britain, newly-revived by Fisher. No entrenched male hierarchy was yet in place, as it was in fine art. Enamelling became Tina's medium of choice. Under her married surname of Mills she immortalised women's courage in suffrage-inspired plaques and jewellery as well as individual badges for women's suffrage societies.

Charles Rowley of Manchester was behind the official purchase for the municipal school of art museum, of an enamelled silver triptych by Ernestine Mills, *Peace, War, Famine*. It conjured up the horrors of the Crimean War and the heroic role of Florence Nightingale and her trained nurses.

### **The Pankhursts - more cause and effect**

Following the death of toddler Frank and further financial tribulations, by late 1893 the Pankhurst family was again domiciled in Manchester. Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst allied themselves with the emergent Independent Labour Party. This unleashed against them, a host of new public prejudices. The *red doctor* no longer attracted the rich clients needed by his legal practice to subsidise the unpaid legal work he did for good causes. His health suffered with acute bouts of digestive pain.

Emmeline and daughter Christabel left on a long-pre-arranged visit to friends in Geneva. Whilst they were abroad, Dr Pankhurst became gravely ill with a perforated stomach ulcer. In spite of the best efforts of Sylvia and the medical doctor, in 1898 Sylvia's beloved father died. On the train returning from France, Emmeline learnt of her husband's death from a newspaper. At forty years of age she was a widow. Sylvia was sixteen, the same age that Ernestine Evans Bell had been when her father died a decade earlier.

'Drudge and drill, drudge and drill' had been watchwords of Richard Marsden Pankhurst. They summed up only too well the life, work and death of this committed, intellectual guardian of humanity. They were to sum up the lives of his widow and children also. Emmeline with her three daughters and surviving son Harry, stoically continued to champion political underdogs such as the Boers during the South African War. Grieving time always seems to have been a luxury the family could not afford.

There were Dr Pankhurst's election debts still to be settled. Emmeline refused charity. In 1894 she had been elected to a district Board of Governors of the Poor Law. This brought her face to face with the harrowing results of laws formulated to accommodate male moral frailty with no consideration given to the consequences of male dereliction of duty on female 'non-persons' in law. Now in her hour of need Emmeline

took a paid position with the Board of Guardians as registrar of births, marriages and deaths.

The bereaved Pankhurst family moved to a smaller house. Charles Rowley called to value paintings to be sold. He saw and was impressed by, Sylvia's still life paintings.

### **Art for survival's sake; and the WSPU**

To Sylvia's joy she was offered a free studentship to the Manchester Municipal School of Art. Later, in 1902, Sylvia aged twenty won a travelling scholarship to study art in Italy. She attended the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Venice which awarded her a diploma.

Sylvia's landlady in Venice invited her to stay longer at no expense. However Sylvia received a letter from Christabel announcing that she intended to study law and become a barrister like their late father. Therefore Sylvia was needed at home to help Emmeline. Sylvia returned to Manchester where she found that the Independent Labour Party had dedicated a new hall to the memory of the late Dr Richard Marsden Pankhurst. Emmeline had promised that Sylvia would decorate the walls, working within a tight time frame. The mission was accomplished in three weeks.

Emmeline and Sylvia discovered to their dismay that the hall was for men only. Dr Pankhurst would not have approved. The seeds of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) were sewn. Fruition came with a meeting of Emmeline's invited women friends on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1903 at the Pankhurst home, 62 Nelson Street, Manchester. The primary purpose of the newly formed Union was to demand votes for women. Its slogan *Deeds, not words* contrasted with the easily ignored, lady-like political negotiations of the existing National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) led by Millicent Fawcett. WSPU demands would be backed by militant action.

Sylvia called at the office of the *Labour Leader* newspaper with a WSPU resolution for publication. Editor Katherine Glasier expressed regret that the Pankhurst women were no longer sweet and gentle. It upset the sensitive artist in Sylvia to think that her mother, sisters and she would henceforth be perceived as harridans but life experience had stiffened resolve. How many future suffragettes, one wonders, were motivated by the spectacle of widowed mothers with no vocational training, reduced to low-paid servitude in an effort to raise their children?

After successfully completing her Manchester art studies, Sylvia was awarded a two year scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art in London, formerly the South Kensington School of Art where Ernestine Evans Bell had studied. Life as a student was hard and frugal. Additionally, much unpaid administrative work was demanded of Sylvia for the emergent WSPU.



Around the time that Sylvia's Royal College of Art scholarship ended, Christabel matriculated from Victoria University, Manchester. Emmeline dispatched Christabel to London as chief WSPU organiser, on a salary. Sylvia, who had recently served two prison sentences for taking part in street demonstrations and whose health was at a low ebb, took the opportunity to pack her paints and travel north on a project of her own. In the early summer of 1907 she set herself a fact-finding mission, visually recording women's often harsh conditions of employment. Sketches and paintings had to be carried out as fast as women worked.

### **Women's work is never equal**

One of the images thus captured is entitled *In a Leicester Boot Factory*. The subject is a woman in a light blue smock, seated beside a machine used in shoemaking. The woman is largely considered to be Alice Hawkins about whom Sylvia wrote, 'At night I held meetings for the local WSPU, amongst whom, only Mrs Hawkins as yet dared mount the platform'.

Alice had left school at thirteen. She joined the Equity shoe factory, an early workers' co-operative venture that encouraged her interest in politics. Alice was a strong-minded woman noted in Leicester for wearing a rational bloomer costume when out riding with the Clarion Cycling Club. In February 1907 Alice travelled to London to take part in a WSPU meeting on the occasion of the state opening of Parliament. As a result she found herself numbered among suffragettes arrested by the police. Alice was sentenced to fourteen days in Holloway Prison. One of Alice's co-prisoners was Sylvia Pankhurst. Far from being deterred by her prison sentence, Alice on her return to Leicester founded a branch of the WSPU. Sylvia visited and requested permission to paint Alice and the other women at work in the shoe factory.

By June 1908 when the WSPU staged its *Women's Sunday* rally in Hyde Park, Alice Hawkins was a speaker on one of the platforms. Alice was jailed five times during the campaign to win votes for women.

In 2002, a small collection of pictures by Sylvia was auctioned at Bonham's in London. It included images both from Italy and from her *women's work* series. They were the property of descendants of Minnie O'Brien, a friend of Sylvia's from the period after 1912 when she founded the East London Fellowship of the WSPU, later the East London Fellowship of Suffragettes or ELFS which eventually became the Workers' Suffrage Federation. Most of these art images feature in the book by Sylvia's son Richard Pankhurst, published by Paddington Press in 1979, *Sylvia Pankhurst, Artist and Crusader*.

Leicester City Museum service took advantage of the 2002 auction opportunity to acquire the *Alice* image for the local Newarke Houses social history museum.

After Leicester, Sylvia moved on to the Staffordshire Potteries. At the 2002 auction, an image titled *Old-fashioned Pottery: women transferring patterns* was bought by MP Frank Field for the House of Commons. In Sylvia's painting, paper designs are being transferred to newly baked, unglazed ware, or biscuit. A transparent over-glaze would next be applied to each piece before re-firing to produce a glazed, non-porous surface like that of the tureen in the foreground of the composition.

In another picture, Sylvia captured women scouring residue flint dust from newly baked biscuit, and stamping items with the pottery name. The women's hair is protected by a cap, but their lungs are inhaling the deadly dust. Sylvia was told that a modicum of extra expenditure would protect the workers, but it was not forthcoming. She learned that lead was used in the glazing process. This was to extend the range of firing temperatures, saving fuel. Lives were expendable. The wombs of pot-bank women could be affected by the lead. Their babies could be still-born.

In the potteries, as elsewhere, women were subordinated to men. Conspiracies between employers and unions debarred women from better paid jobs such as gilding. Women were often employed not by the pottery company but by the individual man for whom each toiled – slaves of slaves. Sylvia's tour of the potteries was facilitated by radical MP Colonel Josiah Wedgwood IV (1872 –1943) great-great-grandson of the original famous potter. Sylvia noted that the progressive Wedgwood pottery did not use lead in its glaze and advised friends to buy Wedgwood. Thirty years later, when Sylvia was championing the cause of Ethiopia then under Italian occupation, Colonel Wedgwood tabled numerous Parliamentary questions on her behalf.

In Berwickshire Sylvia was fascinated by the picturesque peasant costume of agricultural workers. The women wore wide-brimmed hats and cotton scarves in a small red and white check material. Skirts of brown or grey woollen stuff striped with tiny lines of red or blue were worn with similar aprons, and plain, buttoned bodices in red or blue. Sylvia noted that though half the workforce might be women who worked alongside the men for the same number of hours, women were paid less. Men were paid for the whole season whether there was work for them or not. Women were paid only for the hours they worked.

### **The angel of death**

In 1909 a telegram advised Sylvia that her twenty-year-old brother Harry was seriously ill. She rushed to his side at the suffragette nursing home of Nurse Pine in London. Harry had fallen victim to that terrible and obscure disease known as Poliomyelitis. Harry was paralysed from the waist down and suffering intolerable agony. Their mother Emmeline was on the brink of sailing to America for a lecture tour. Emmeline sailed reluctantly, feeling that the money she could earn might be needed to pay for the unknown future of her stricken son. Sylvia was left in charge of the patient, as she had been when her father died.

In her book, *The Suffragette Movement* Sylvia records the shocked distress of the family doctor, Herbert Mills, who realised that the physical damage was irreversible and could see life ebbing from her adored brother. Soon after Emmeline returned from the United States, in January 1910 Harry breathed his last.

In grief, each new catastrophe may awaken previous sorrows to add to the debilitating burden. The Pankhursts characteristically had no time for grief. A general election was in progress. Emmeline was committed to a speaking tour. She wrote to WSPU supporters ‘... just behave to me as if no great sorrow had come just now. It breaks me down to talk about it ... I want to get through my work ...’

On Friday 18th November 1910 Emmeline and her younger sister Mary Clarke took part in a deputation to Prime Minister Asquith who had reneged on yet another conciliatory promise to women. Asquith refused to receive the deputation. Orders were given to police not only to disperse the women but to assault them to discourage further political activity. Many delegates, including Mary Clarke, were seriously injured. The day entered the annals of government infamy as ‘Black Friday’.

Four days later Mary was imprisoned for a month for window breaking. She died a few days after her release, on Christmas Day 1910. As Mary had helped raise Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, her death would have been keenly felt by them as well as by Emmeline. No political capital was made from Mary’s death although clearly she was a martyr to the cause. Was the grief too close and too deep?

In 1911 Tom, the youngest son of Sylvia’s friend Alice Hawkins from the Leicester shoe factory, died suddenly from blood poisoning. Sylvia, who knew the pain of loss too well, wrote a moving letter of condolence that was treasured by Alice and her family.

**Love is indestructible; its holy flame forever burneth.**

*Quotation on a World War I memorial enamelled by Ernestine Mills*

Herbert Mills (1868-1947) the Pankhurst family doctor at the time of Harry’s death, was husband to Ernestine, suffragette artist daughter of the late Emily and Thomas Evans Bell. Tina and Herbert Mills were Fabians, as were the Pankhursts. Little by little they did what they could to advance the common good of mankind. Dr Mills served on the Advisory Council for the Lloyd George National Insurance Act of 1911, assuring affordable health care for the poor. At the time, council members were castigated by the medical establishment, fearful of losing revenue. Countless lives have since been saved by this humane legislation.

In January and December 1910, Emmeline and Sylvia did what they always did at traumatic times such as the death of a loved one. They wept privately and went on working for women’s suffrage. Campaigning had now, one way or another claimed the

lives of four people very dear to them. Perhaps keeping focused on winning the vote helped justify the deaths and eased the heart-ache. Perhaps un-expressed grief finally clouded Emmeline's otherwise astute political judgment...

WSPU autocracy and militancy began to escalate into arson and art damage. Sylvia disapproved of the new direction the WSPU campaign had taken which she deemed counter-productive to winning public sympathy for votes for women. Emmeline and Christabel concentrated on attracting to their ranks the influential social elite. Sylvia conversely felt that broad-based, working-class support was vital to success. Her democratic East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) was expelled from the WSPU as deviating from its leaders' policy.

To the WSPU campaign colours of purple, white and green, the ELFS added red, symbolizing the French Revolution red cap of liberty. The ELFS' aim was changed from votes for women to adult suffrage, enfranchising all adult males regardless of property qualification as well as all females regardless of marital status.

The whole world wept for pity when, between 1914 and 1918, world powers clashed in total war. Emmeline and Christabel supported war. Sylvia opposed it. Throughout the war Sylvia and her East London Federation worked with the community. Sylvia established self-help, cost-price restaurants; baby clinics and nurseries; employment bureaux and a toy-making factory. Thus the ELFS alleviated some of the worst of war misery for some of the poorest people. The title was changed to the Workers' Suffrage Federation or WSF.

### **Work, work, work**

As with most women, after Ernestine Mills gave her hand in marriage and motherhood followed, she wished she had an extra hand to help run the household. To normal wifely duties Tina had to add supervising the medical practice of a popular Kensington medical General Practitioner. The practice had to be run on a shoestring as the highly developed social conscience of Dr Mills led him to treat the poor of Notting Hill without charge. Tina would not have had it otherwise but from 1898 she struggled to keep up her art.

Against all the odds, Tina kept creating for the next sixty years. Her enamelling kiln was accommodated in a disused stable at the bottom of the garden. This became her studio. By exhibiting at the Society of Women Artists annual exhibition one hopes Ernestine earned sufficient from her art to pay the governess who took her place in her daughter Hermia's nursery. Hermia, born in 1902, remembered all her life the periodic inconvenience of having her nursery taken over for suffrage banner-making work parties.

During World War I, Ernestine gave service at the Earls Court camp where seven thousand refugees from Europe were given food, shelter and clothing.

Ernestine in her lifetime was well known in artistic circles. Her enamel work was exhibited at the Royal Academy and galleries world-wide. She was as successful, professionally, as a woman artist at that time was likely to be. In 1950, aged seventy-nine, Tina was commissioned by the Suffragette Fellowship to enamel a memorial tablet for Brackenbury House on Camden Hill, West London, home of Hilda Brackenbury and her two artist daughters Georgina and Marie, by then all deceased. The Brackenbury home had served as a hiding place for suffragettes wanted by police. The tablet is now on display in the Museum of London.

Fashions change. The reputations of artists may fade. If Sylvia Pankhurst had ignored the human need of East Londoners during World War I in order to concentrate on art, could her long-term contribution to society have been more worthwhile? Possibly not! Sylvia's ambition was to make the world more beautiful. Nothing becomes it better than an ardent human spirit. The aim of radicals was, by their endeavours, to leave the world a better place. Agnostics with a social conscience have been described as *God's right hand*.

### **The vote at last!**

When peace was declared in the UK in 1918, so was government acceptance of the concept of *votes for women*. The civil victory was won largely thanks to the opinion-changing ground-work of far-sighted radical networks be they law-abiding NUWSS suffragist, law-breaking WSPU militant suffragette, passive resistance Women's Freedom League (WFL), socialist ELFS or any number of other networks supporting the progress of human-kind.

In the 1918 general election, British women (over thirty, with property or educational qualifications) at last voted for the first time. There was little rejoicing. The price paid included the sacrifice of millions of lives in the First World War. Women had earned the right to vote by serving their country both by taking over the work of men on the home front and as auxiliary staff in the theatre of war. Nevertheless it was expediency as much as justice that persuaded a wartime coalition government led by Lloyd George finally to grant voting rights to a selected section of women in the *khaki* election.

One of the legal voting requirements for men was that they should have been resident householders in Britain for the previous twelve months. In 1918, men in the armed forces fighting for their country abroad could not meet that qualification. The law had to be changed. In what became known as the Fourth Reform Act, the opportunity was taken to lower qualifications so that practically all men over twenty-one could vote.

The majority of newly enfranchised men, it was deemed, would vote Labour. By contrast, women aged over thirty could be expected to vote Liberal or Conservative. The enfranchisement of women over thirty was meant to redress the electoral balance. It did. A coalition government was elected, again led by Lloyd George.

In 1918 the Parliamentary Qualification of Women Act gave women over twenty-one the right to stand as a Member of Parliament. The first woman so elected was Irish political activist Constance Markiewicz, whilst detained in Holloway Prison. Markiewicz rejected a seat in the British House of Commons, becoming instead the first woman in the world to hold a cabinet position: that of Minister of Labour in the Irish Republic, 1919-1922. Her seat in the British Parliament was taken by Nancy Astor.

Another decade was to pass before in 1928 universal and equal adult male and female suffrage – true democracy - became law in Britain. The 1929 *flapper* election when all women over twenty-one voted for the first time produced a Labour-Liberal coalition government under Ramsay MacDonald.

### **Ethiopia**

Set against her radical family background and her era, Sylvia Pankhurst's championing of women's suffrage was fulfillment of her destiny. It took a strong character to devote her entire life to serving the commonweal selflessly without flinching. Sylvia's father would have been proud of her. The art that Sylvia regretted having to abandon, although a loss to society, may in the end have proved personally less fulfilling than helping others. The final chapter in Sylvia's life, although in character with her constant readiness to defend right against might, is the most surprising being a reaction to world events that could not have been foreseen.

In 1936 Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975) of Ethiopia was exiled in Britain. His country had been invaded by Italy under Mussolini's fascist regime. Ethiopian warriors refused to submit to conquest and colonisation. They fought on as best they could against the superior weaponry of the fascist invaders. Sylvia took up the cause of what was then virtually the only remaining indigenous independent state on the African continent. With her life partner, Italian patriot and anti-fascist Silvio Corio, father of their son Richard born in 1927, Sylvia founded a newspaper *New Times and Ethiopia News*, to draw the world's attention to the plight of Ethiopia.

Artist Ernestine Mills demonstrated her support for Ethiopia by enamelling a portrait of Emperor Haile Selassie against the background of his mountainous country. This went on public display in London at the Society of Women Artists' exhibition of 1937 and was later gifted to the Ethiopian Embassy in London.

In a horrifying foretaste of what was to come when World War II was declared in 1939, Ethiopia was pitted for survival against overwhelming modern weaponry including air power. In 1941, British and Allied forces, aided by the Emperor and his Ethiopian army, succeeded in repelling the invaders and liberating Ethiopia. International intervention to save the African country's autonomy was thanks in no small part to Sylvia's relentless political exhortations to action in its defense.

In 1942 the Emperor's daughter Princess Tsehai died in childbirth. The princess had trained as a nurse at Great Ormond Street and Guy's Hospitals in London. She hoped to introduce modern medical practice into Ethiopia. Sylvia took up the challenge to help fulfill the princess's dream by raising funds in Britain to build the first modern hospital in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. The successful outcome was named The Princess Tsehai Memorial Hospital.

Emperor Haile Selassie invited Sylvia to live in Addis Ababa. Six years after the death of partner Corio in 1950, Sylvia decided to take up the Emperor's invitation. Aged seventy-four, accompanied by her son Richard, Sylvia entered wholeheartedly into this new adventure. Richard, who had by this time completed his studies at the London School of Economics, took up a teaching post at the then University College of Addis Ababa. Richard's future wife Rita joined the group to become a librarian at the National Library of Ethiopia. In 1957 Richard and Rita were married. Sylvia spent the last years of her life living happily with the young couple.

Sylvia's sense of service to others never diminished. She edited a monthly journal, *Ethiopia Observer*, and continued supporting the teaching hospital she had helped to build. Sylvia's driver in Addis Ababa later told Rita that Sylvia had, on several occasions, seen a disabled beggar whose contorted limbs, she had reason to believe, could be straightened by the orthopaedic surgeon who had recently joined the hospital. She stopped the car and took the stranger to the hospital, for treatment at her expense. Sylvia's brother Harry may have been beyond aid, but she could still help others to a better life.

After four years of public spirited work in Ethiopia, Sylvia's life adventure ended on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1960. Her death was followed by a state funeral attended by Emperor Haile Selassie, and burial at Trinity Cathedral in ground reserved for Ethiopian patriots. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the state funeral is celebrated this year.

### **United stand we at last?**

Sylvia's mother Emmeline and her sister Christabel had drifted towards Conservatism and jingo-ism. Sylvia and Adela drifted towards their father's Socialism and pacifism. Both path choices are understandable set against the ethos of their times. A family ideological rift appeared, never successfully to be bridged in the lifetimes of these four courageous women who each, in their different ways, helped turn the tide of public opinion in favour of votes for women.

Today, Emmeline Pankhurst is commemorated by a statue and Christabel (created Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1936 for services to women's enfranchisement) by a bronze plaque close by the House of Commons in London. Adela earned a

place in Australian political history: in 1937 she was awarded the Coronation Medal for community services.

In Ethiopia, Sylvia was awarded the Queen of Sheba Medal created to honour women, as well as the Ethiopian Patriots medal. There is no monument in Britain to Sylvia whose policy was to unite class, race and gender in peace and equality. It is the struggle of Sylvia on behalf of others that resonates most clearly with modern society. A monument to Sylvia Pankhurst additionally would commemorate the many self-effacing heroines and heroes in our midst yesterday, today and tomorrow who work tirelessly for the welfare of others.

The Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee has commissioned a bronze maquette of Sylvia from socialist sculptor the late Ian Homer Walters. It depicts Sylvia in characteristic pose, stepping forward to accept the next challenge. At her feet are *Votes for Women* placards. In one arm Sylvia clutches political newspapers she has edited, surely *New Times and Ethiopia News*.

A full size bronze statue of Sylvia, from the maquette, is intended to stand on College Green opposite the Houses of Parliament. Planning permission has been granted. The House of Commons has registered its approval. The House of Lords has yet to agree. Details of how to subscribe to the statue that would re-unite the Pankhurst women are available from the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee.

The Sylvia Pankhurst maquette was kindly loaned by the Memorial Committee to the Museum of Richmond upon Thames in Surrey as a focal point for the historic, general election year women's suffrage exhibition, *How the Vote was Won*, 1<sup>st</sup> May until 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010. The maquette was much admired by a new audience before its return to The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, Aldgate East.

*Irene Cockcroft*

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<sup>i</sup> Pankhurst, Sylvia, *The Suffragette Movement*, p.88

<sup>ii</sup> Purvis, June, *Emmeline Pankhurst – A Biography*, p.27; also Pankhurst, C., *Unshackled*, p.27

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, p.36; also Coleman, V., *Adela Pankhurst*, pp.14-15



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