

## How the Vote was Won

In 1918 British women over thirty voted for the first time. There was little rejoicing. The price included the sacrifice of thousands of lives in the First World War. Women had earned the right to vote, serving their country both on the home front and in the theatre of war. Another decade was to pass before universal male and female suffrage became law in Britain.

The vote was won by patient, determined influencing of public opinion to the point where the concept of *Votes for Women* changed from contentious to desirable. Both militant *suffragette* and law-abiding *suffragist* tactics were necessary in the long campaign to achieve true democracy. The campaign spanned generations. Much of the spade-work was done by networks of far-sighted, politically radical families. Women's art, writing, debate, theatre and music all played a part.

## Others

Sylvia Pankhurst was an influential artist, and a leading protagonist in the fight for women's suffrage. Sylvia was a child of a politically radical family; that is, a family dedicated to change for the public good - for *others* – regardless of how unpopular its views might be with established authority. Both Sylvia's paternal and maternal grandparents as well as her parents took an active interest in public affairs.

How does a public-spirited family cope with the ups and downs of private life? Adults and children must commit to sacrifice! The concept of putting others first 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.

Most striking to me is the way in which Sylvia's family dealt with personal grief. In the teeth of the most terrible tragedies, they kept on working for others. I don't think the parents, Emmeline and Richard Marsden Pankhurst, consciously registered the need for time for themselves. Perhaps, although intentions were

good, they were unable to allow sufficient time for their children either. In an era of large families, high infant mortality and long working hours, this was normal.

My own family history to some extent runs parallel with that of the Pankhurst's. I hope that, by highlighting similar events in the lives of two radical families, I can make Sylvia more real to you as a person. Inevitably, there's much of the Sylvia story I'll have to leave out.

### **The Evans Bell connection**

In 1866 my great, great-aunt Emily 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 and signatures were collected by the Kensington Society. Sympathetic Member of Parliament John Stuart Mill presented the petition to the all-male House of Commons. It was thrown out. This marked the beginning of sustained agitation by women to establish equal voting rights.

Emily and her husband Major Thomas Evans Bell were Freethinkers, supporters of G.J. Holyoake and the Robert Owen Co-operative movement. Bell was treasurer for funds raised in Britain to assist General Garibaldi and his Republican army in the attempt to unite the separate states of Italy into one strong nation capable of resisting the territorial ambitions of Austria, France and Germany. In 1891, the Bell family was firmly behind the election of 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.

Emily and Thomas Evans Bell, and lawyer Dr Richard Marsden Pankhurst, served together on the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage. In the 1860s Pankhurst had drafted the first women's suffrage bill (unsuccessful) and the amendment moved by radical MP Jacob Bright that 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.

Other radical friends of the Bell and Pankhurst families in Manchester included artist Frederic Shields, and picture framer Charles Rowley who was active in establishing the municipal Art Gallery.

## Five children and fate

Dr Pankhurst's marriage to Emmeline Goulden produced a family of three daughters: Christabel, Sylvia and Adela; and two sons, Frank and Harry. Each of the first three Pankhurst children sensibly arrived two years apart. Mother Emmeline had been the eldest child in her family of origin. She naturally related most strongly to her own first-born, Christabel. In the nature of things, the first baby also benefits from the most parental attention.

Sylvia was born second, in 1882. In 1883 Dr Pankhurst unsuccessfully (and expensively) stood as an independent candidate in a local by-election, mainly to publicise his radical ideas including votes for women. Under the circumstances, Sylvia is unlikely to have enjoyed much parental doting.

The third child, Frank, was born in 1884. The fourth, Adela, arrived only one year after her brother. Even more inconsiderate, Adela was delicate, demanding extra attention. Frank must have been catapulted into early independence.

The family moved to London in the hope of establishing a broader base for Dr Pankhurst's political influence. 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. Much faith had to be placed in servants to run the London household and raise the children. The children needed to mature early. Increased living expenses posed an additional strain on stretched financial resources. Then the unthinkable happened.

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, overcome with grief, withdrew from her remaining children. Sensitive Sylvia felt that her own death would have been preferable to Frank's. It may have been at this point that Adela, too young to react appropriately to the loss, became emotionally distanced from her family.

As an adult, Adela served for a time as organiser of the WSPU in Sheffield. In 1912 she answered the call to help women in Australia consolidate their political gain of early voting rights. Family ties were loosened for life.

Confident Christabel seems to have taken on the mantle of the lost boy-child and the high expectations for his future. As an adult she studied law and took over her father's role as women's suffrage political strategist.

In 1889 Emmeline gave birth to another son, Harry. Sylvia, seven, formed a special bond with the baby boy, lavishing on him the love that life demands made it impossible for their mother to give. Emmeline packed so much into her life that it's easy to forget she married at 21 and gave birth to five children as well as accomplishing much else within a decade.

### **Similar tragedies**

In the meantime, in London, radical Major Thomas Evans Bell of the British Army in India had married classical actress Emily Magnus. Emily continued to practice her profession, as a necessary supplement to the family income. Thomas retired early from the army in order to write political treatises that would help the people of India but not his finances.

Thomas and Emily had two daughters: little Emily (called Mynie) and Ernestine (called Tina). The family took up residence in Barnes, London. Bad drainage in the area at the time, led to an outbreak of typhoid. Mynie, the elder Bell daughter, died. Tina only just survived. The devastated Bell family withdrew to Kensington. 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 *the apple of her parents' eye* had perished. As if in confirmation, Mynie's gravestone reads, 'Our noble, intelligent, beautiful child died 1878 aged 9 years, 2 months, and 8 days.'

Ernestine's attendance record at Kensington High School for Girls, when she was twelve, is poor. Her beloved father was dying of cancer and she was needed at home. Her mother, Emily, had to work as a teacher of elocution to make ends meet for her family. Emily adopted the professional name *Mrs Fairfax* in deference to her 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, Emily proudly refused charity. By age 21, Ernestine was a double orphan.

Emily's dying words were, 'Tina my child, do thy work well.' That meant, work for women's suffrage. Tina Bell was now alone in the world. Emily, in her

will, commends her daughter to the guardianship of Professor William Ayrton, father of Tina's close friend Edith. The professor's second wife, Hertha, was a militant suffrage campaigner.

### **Creating a career**

From childhood, Ernestine had been taught drawing 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 were orphans. Their livelihoods depended on competing in the market place with flamboyant male contemporaries like Augustus John. Hedging her bets on earning a living, at night Tina trained as a silversmith and enameller. Enamelling was a newly-revived industry in which no male hierarchy was yet in place. Enamelling became Tina's medium of choice. She immortalised women's courage in suffrage-inspired plaques and jewellery.

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

### **More cause and effect**

Dr Pankhurst stood for election at Rotherhithe as a radical. The lawyer's political opponent was not above using slander to even the odds, implying that Pankhurst was an atheist unbeliever rather than an agnostic questioner. Pankhurst lost the election.

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. He began to suffer acute bouts of digestive pain.

Emmeline and daughter Christabel left on a visit to France. 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 her beloved father died. She was sixteen. Emmeline learnt of her husband's death through reading the newspaper.

'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 guardian of humanity. They were to sum up the lives of his family also. As one family crisis followed another, wife, daughters and son Harry stoically continued to champion political underdogs, like 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. Widowed Emmeline refused charity. She took a paid position as registrar of births, marriages and deaths. The 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 Municipal School of Art. In 1902, aged 20, Sylvia won a travelling scholarship to study art in Italy. She joined the Academy of Art in Venice.

Sylvia's landlady in Venice invited her to stay longer at no expense. However Sylvia received a letter from Christabel announcing she intended to study law and become a barrister. 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 her late father. Emmeline had promised that Sylvia would decorate the walls within a tight time frame. The mission was accomplished in three weeks.

Emmeline and Sylvia discovered to their horror that the hall was for men only. The seeds of the Women's Social and Political Union were sewn. Fruition came with a meeting of 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. It contrasted with the easily ignored, lady-like political negotiations of the existing National Union of Women's

Suffrage Societies led by Millicent Fawcett. The slogan of the WSPU was 'Deeds, not words'. 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.

After completing her Manchester 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 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, with honours. Being female, she was not permitted to practice as a lawyer. Emmeline dispatched Christabel to London as chief WSPU organiser, on a salary. Sylvia took the opportunity to pack her paints and travel north on a project of her own. She set herself a fact-finding tour 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 may 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, a workers' co-operative that encouraged her to take an interest in Trade Unionism. In June 1908 when the WSPU staged its *Women's Sunday* rally in Hyde Park, Alice Hawkins spoke from one of the platforms. She 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 descendents 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*.

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 the powdered flint dust from newly baked biscuit, and stamping items with the maker's 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. She was horrified to learn 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 women often became affected by lead poisoning. Their babies could be still-borne.

In the potteries, as elsewhere, women were subordinated to men. Conspiracies between employers and unions debarred women from better paid jobs. Women were employed not by the pottery company but by the individual man for whom each toiled – slaves of slaves.

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. Short 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. 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**

A telegram advised Sylvia that her 20 year old brother Harry was seriously ill. She rushed to his side at the suffragette nursing home of Nurse Pine in London. He'd contracted 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 went, feeling that the money she could earn might be needed to pay for the unknown future of the stricken young man. 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 who realised the physical damage was irreversible and could see life ebbing from her adored brother. When Emmeline returned from the United States, Harry breathed his last.

### **The spirit of love**

The Pankhurst family doctor at that time was Herbert Mills, husband to Ernestine, suffragette artist daughter of the late Emily and Thomas Evans Bell. My great-aunt Tina, and Herbert were Fabians, little by little doing what they could for the common good, as were the Pankhursts. Dr Mills served on the Advisory Council for the Lloyd George National Insurance Act of 1911, assuring affordable health care for the poor. Who knows how many other Harries were saved in the future by this humane legislation?

Emmeline and Sylvia did what they always did at such times – wept privately and went on working. Sylvia's son Richard recalls how, much later when the family lived in Ethiopia, his mother would stop the car to take a crippled stranger to hospital to be treated, at her expense. If Sylvia's own brother was beyond aid, she could still help others to a better life.

### **United we stand**

Sylvia had drifted increasingly towards her father's socialism. Her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel surprisingly drifted towards Conservatism. An ideological rift appeared, never to be successfully bridged in the lifetimes of these three courageous women who, with their life's blood, helped turn the tide of public opinion in favour of votes for women.

Today, both Emmeline and Christabel are commemorated close by the House of Commons. There is no monument to Sylvia whose policy was to unite class and gender and whose struggles on behalf of others resonate the most closely with modern society.

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, on the move. Underfoot are *Votes for Women* placards. In one arm she clutches political newspapers she has edited, possibly *New Times and Ethiopia News*, published from 1936 to assist Emperor Haile Selassie repulse the invasion of his country, Ethiopia, by Mussolini's well-armed fascist troops.

A larger than life-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.

The Sylvia Pankhurst maquette has kindly been loaned by the Memorial Committee to the Museum of Richmond upon Thames in Surrey as a focal point for the women's suffrage exhibition, *How the Vote was Won*, 1<sup>st</sup> May until 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010, for which many thanks. It has been much admired by a new audience. The maquette shortly returns to The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University.

*Irene Cockroft*

#### Postscript:

If you would like to suggest another venue for the *How the Vote was Won* exhibition, which incorporates a series of wall panels and several display cases of historic objects, please contact Irene Cockroft through the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee.

### **The Women's Anthem – Love and Justice**

At the beginning of Irene's talk she played a CD of the Women's Anthem – *Love and Justice*, composed by Kavisha Mazzella for the Victorian Women's Trust, Melbourne, Australia. The anthem was composed and sung by a volunteer choir of 450 women from the state of Victoria in 2008. This was to celebrate the centenary of women being granted the vote in the state parliamentary election. The nation-wide Federal vote had been granted in 1902.

The anthem has been gifted to women everywhere. If you would like further information, please access the website [www.vwt.org.au](http://www.vwt.org.au) and select from the menu *Our special initiatives* then *Love and Justice Women's Anthem*; also of interest are sections *Spotlight on Kavisha Mazzella* and *Women's Anthem Sightings* to which you are invited to add your own special use.

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