
As with other righteous struggles, the campaign for female suffrage in Britain created something of an aura. The comparatively more mundane, but ultimately perhaps more important, aspects of the movement have been under-appreciated. The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), the suffrage society establish by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, was conceived of as an expression of militancy, and it is less readily considered organisationally, yet to be successful the cause needed structure, processes, and personnel. By 1911, the WSPU had around 150 paid organisers, as well as its own newspaper, Votes for Women. All the organisers were of women, but from very different backgrounds. The earliest to mobilise tended to be from trade unions and the ILP, and whilst Edith New, suitably ‘the WSPU’s first window-smasher’ (p. 16), was a teacher, and an experience common to many were the restrictions women had faced in the education system. Salaries were a prosaic but, as they had been for MPs, an essential provision, but what really animated the organisation was common experience: social stigma, motherhood, the training of organisers, and their subsequent esprit d’ corps. As Christabel Pankhurst put it, ‘the bond is womanhood!’

Campaigning was both positive and negative: proselytising and disrupting. It required emulation (‘the methods which men had used to get the vote’ p. 119), transgression (for Christabel the first step of militancy was ‘[t]he hardest ... because it was the first’, p. 120), and itinerancy, perhaps the most prominent feature in the life of an organiser, who ‘often felt herself a lonely outsider ... a bird of passage in some hotel’, as Sylvia Pankhurst said of her mother (p. 52). During by-elections, organisers had to act virtually as flying pickets. The geographical range required of their activities itself promoted the cause, and campaigns could be a wonderful experience, as one organiser remembered, ‘like putting a match to a flame’ (p. 44). Controlled militancy was controlled fury; organisation was what made it possible.

Krista Cowman has written an institutional history organised, sensibly enough, around themes rather than chronology, with the war, as it did at the time, demanding special attention. The institution existed in the country, on the ground, but also in the centre; yet, even there, headquarters was perceived as a dynamic force rather than a physical location (p.92). The author shows how the organisers were much like those in any organisation: there were the vociferous and the temporising, and those who found being an activist easier than being an organiser. The WSPU, too, was an institution much like any other: it had to manage dissent, factionalism and splits, and could be as prone to autocratic impulses as any other organisation – particularly where the Pankhursts were concerned. Nevertheless, ‘[w]hat remains most striking ... is that all of the work there was done by women, who consistently sought a more feminised way of doing things’ (p. 115). By analysing process the book fills a significant gap in a historiography preoccupied with personalities, yet it most effectively marshals the human alongside the structural, whilst avoiding anecdotalising or sentimentalising. It is, in short, hard to imagine being done better.

The climax is the war, which brought about the disintegration of the organisation, driving some women into militancy against their own organisation for it abandoning the struggle and adopting an unrelated one: ‘King, Country and Freedom’ (p. 187). Given that, the end of the story, of the struggle, is still shockingly bathetic. The war was won; votes for women were passed by Parliament; the organisers found themselves well-trained for post-war employment opportunities. Having said that, the experience of running the WSPU meant that others found it difficult to function in mixed-sex organisations. Curiously, parliament seldom featured, as few remained politically active. Of those who did, some became Tories, and some became fascists. Unlike the men whose struggle for suffrage they emulated, the women of the WSPU had little in common but their gender and their cause. Yet there is something in the experience of the women before the war that recalls the experience of the men who went to fight it; it was a singular experience, that overshadowed the rest of their lives. This is a good and a necessary book, and, as such, one deserved by its subject.

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