Women’s Suffrage and Political Activism

Feb 3rd 2018, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge

Abstracts

**Plenary** – Jill Liddington, Reflecting on suffrage history across four decades: if all campaigners wanted the vote, why did relationships grow so complex?

Jill Liddington starts with discovering radical suffragists like Selina Cooper and Ada Nield Chew, then focusses on the years 1911-1914. The 1911 census boycott was supported by suffragettes but the large Women’s Co-operative Guild opposed it. Why? Later, the labour-suffrage pact gave radical suffragists new political allies. Yet what tensions did the pact bring for suffragists steeped in Liberalism? Finally, walking together on the great 1913 Suffrage Pilgrimage were both working-class women and their affluent sisters all disenfranchised. Against a background of suffragette arson attacks, the pilgrims’ aim was to get Asquith’s ear. Which propaganda tactics succeeded?

**Panel 1a: Rethinking Class in the Suffrage Movement**

Karen Hunt, Lyndsey Jenkins, Laura Schwartz

Class was one of the most powerful forces which shaped the women’s movement in the early twentieth century. Both suffrage organisations and the labour movement became increasingly vocal and visible in their demands, and yet, though there was often consensus and collaboration, especially at local levels, there could also be profound disagreements over both ends and means. Though historians have comprehensively challenged the idea that women’s suffrage was purely a middle-class movement, all suffrage organisations had to face the difficulties of pursuing a feminist agenda in a deeply class-ridden society. Indeed, there was even dispute over whether working-class women would be enfranchised through the suffrage campaign at all, given that most women’s organisations were campaigning on the basis that the franchise would be granted to women on the same terms at men, excluding those who did not own property. Close scrutiny of these debates reveals a great deal about the assumptions and priorities of the women and men active in the suffrage campaign.

This panel brings together new research which explores how women confronted, negotiated, or attempted to gloss over the fractious intersections of class and gender. Laura Schwartz (University of Warwick) will discuss ‘The wrong kind of working-class woman? Domestic servants in British suffrage novels’. While domestic servants are strikingly absent from formal propaganda and public spectacle of the suffrage campaigns, reading suffrage novels helps reveal why the domestic servant was such a troublesome figure for first wave
feminists. The paper argues that suffrage novels can be read together as developing a common set of cultural tropes through which to understand the meaning of the domestic servant within a specifically feminist context. Lyndsey Jenkins (University of Oxford) will speak on ‘The politics of class and suffrage in the clogs and shawl’, analysing varying representations of the suffragette activist Annie Kenney - from ‘working-class heroine’ to ‘champion militant’ - to demonstrate how the meaning and significance of class within the Women's Social and Political Union changed over time. While stressing that she was active, rather than passive in this process, self-fashioning her image to suit the organisation’s needs, this paper also demonstrates that Annie Kenney resented being reduced to a caricature in later suffrage history, and she and her family sought to construct a more complex narrative of what it meant to be a working-class suffragette. Karen Hunt (University of Keele) will address ‘Class and Adult Suffrage during the Great War’. She will analyse how adult suffragism moved centrally into the dominant discourse and the practical politics of the home front during World War I. Her paper considers how long-term advocates and more recent adherents to the democratic demand for adult suffrage seized the opportunities presented by the war to make new arguments and forge new alliances. It argues that the experience of the war was crucial to reframing the demand for women’s suffrage and reviving older arguments about the centrality of class to democratic politics.

Panel 1b: British suffrage in North American contexts

Kate Connolly (Arcadia) - ‘Miss Pankhurst Has Some Jolts in Store’: Sylvia Pankhurst’s Tours of North America and their Place in Suffrage History.

In April 1912, Sylvia Pankhurst returned to England from a second suffrage speaking tour of the United States and Canada to find that her mother, Emmeline Pankhurst, was facing a conspiracy charge and that her sister, Christabel, had fled to Paris to escape a warrant for her arrest. Although she did not hold a leading position in the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), Sylvia attempted to transform this increasingly middle-class organisation into one which mobilised working-class women in London’s East End. Less than two years later Christabel would expel this group and Sylvia from the WSPU. The end result is a familiar suffrage story, but the source of Sylvia’s inspiration in 1912 has been overlooked. Original research into Sylvia’s speaking tours of North America in 1911 and 1912, however, reveals a confident political activist who, away from Britain, was prepared to defy the commands of the WSPU leadership. This paper uncovers Sylvia’s support for the American labour movement at a time of bitter industrial disputes, the links she forged between the suffrage movement and campaigns for widespread social reform, and the importance she afforded to challenging racism. It argues that the 1914 breach in the WSPU owes much to the experiences and radical conclusions that Sylvia drew from visiting American prisons, factories and picket lines.
While the Canadian suffrage movement followed its own distinct pathway to women’s enfranchisement, shaped by linguistic, class, race and regional differences, it was also profoundly shaped by transnational influences, especially ideas, communication and migrants from Britain. British suffrage was ‘exported,’ transplanted, translated and reinterpreted to fit Canadian social conditions and issues. Much of the historical writing to date replicates the media coverage of the early 20th century, focusing on the WSPU. However British influences on the Canadian movement were both more long-standing and more ideologically diverse.

Drawing on personal reflections of suffragists, the records of international organizations, and both national and international print sources, this paper explores the transnational relationship between suffragists in Britain and the movement in Canada. Before the suffragette era, British labourism and ILP politics, socialist debates, and even some utopian socialist ideas were transplanted to Canada. Given that many Canadian cities first developed suffrage societies in conjunction with socialist and labour organizations, the imprint of these ideas was very important. Second, the flow of migrants to North America was a critical form of British export. Some key suffrage leaders, especially in the Canadian West, were immigrants whose intellectual baggage included feminist and anti-war ideas which were transplanted to Canadian soil. Whether they sojourned or stayed, they provided an important global transfer of ideas about women’s equality and global politics. Third, the influence of British and commonwealth organizations, such as the British Women’s Suffrage Union (later British Dominion Women’s Citizen Union) had an impact on interwar suffrage struggles in Canada. Canadian women did not all receive the provincial vote until 1940, with Quebec the last to enfranchise. During the 1920s and 1930s, suffragists often looked to Britain and the BDWCU for support, sustaining the long-standing tradition of transnational links between feminists in the mother country and the Dominion of Canada.

As Joan Sangster has indicated in her proposal, British suffragists played a significant role in Canada. This paper introduces the subject of my forthcoming biography, Mary Ellen Spear Smith (1861-1933). The first woman in the BC Legislature and the first female cabinet minister in the British Commonwealth, she was born to a Cornwall mining family. A dressmaker and teacher, she married widowed miner, union activist, and preacher, Ralph Smith and soon bore four sons. His activism drove them to BC coal mines where as a representative of the Liberal-Labour tradition he entered the BC Legislature in 1896 (and
moved a 1899 suffrage bill) and then Canada’s Parliament in 1900. In 1916, he returned to Victoria but died in 1917. Mary Ellen had already proved a critical part of a marital team with an impressive record as a suffragist. In 1918 she held Ralph’s seat for the Liberals. As an Independent, she advocated ‘women and children first’. In 1921, she accepted a cabinet post without portfolio (eight years before Margaret Bondfield joined Ramsay MacDonald’s cabinet). Smith championed progressive causes even as she voiced anti-Asian and eugenicist prejudices. Her 1928 defeat spelled the end of the post-suffrage reform period. In sum, this paper explores how a Lib-Lab suffragist negotiated the ‘edge of empire’ in a political career that melded British and Canadian influences.

**Panel 1c: Women’s work and working class women**

**Helen Glew (University of Westminster) - Visions of a Future Workplace: the Connections between Enfranchisement and Paid Work Opportunities for Women in the Writings of Helena Swanwick**

This paper examines the writings of Helena Swanwick, whose career from 1914 as a feminist pacifist campaigner has been rather more frequently discussed in the historiography than her pre-1914 activism and the wider strands of her feminist thought. Drawing on her The Future of the Women’s Movement (1913) as a principal text but also considering Swanwick’s other writings both for The Common Cause and other publications, the paper seeks to examine her arguments about how the women’s movement could, after the successful enfranchisement of women, work to improve women’s opportunities in paid employment and also, thereby, force a reassessment of gender roles. The paper will further consider the ways in which Swanwick conceptualised women’s work, how far she took account of social class and economic status, and the changes in the education of, and assumptions about, women that she considered necessary.

**Bernadette Cahill (Glasgow University) - ‘A Wummin’s place is in the Home!’ Miss McCann, Madam Lenton and the Freedom League on Clydeside 1908-1933**

When “Miss McCann” landed a summer job, the Clydebank riveter’s daughter also landed in the middle of the women’s equality movement. Her taped recollections many years later brought the campaign to life. Miss McCann helped “Madam Lenton” – the pre-war WSPU militant suffragist now with the WFL – at the Glasgow Fair, the industrial workers’ annual holiday. Her private family archive account triggered this analysis of the WFL’s yearly campaign for the vote and women’s equality on Red Clydeside from 1908 to 1933.

Utilizing a variety of sources, the history of the work of these two women challenges those treatments of women’s equality and class and political relationships which have criticized groups such as the WFL for failure to work adequately with and promote the concerns of working class women. This presentation posits that these relationships were potentially more extensive and of a different nature than previously suggested.
Ruth Cohen (Independent Scholar), ‘Votes for which women? Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the suffrage’

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the elected General Secretary of the overwhelmingly working-class Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG), was a middle class feminist and socialist. In the context of suffrage politics, she is best known for her attempts to unite suffrage and labour activists, particularly through the People’s Suffrage Federation (PSF).

This paper focuses mainly on the period between 1904, when Davies and the Guild supported a “limited” suffrage bill, demanding the vote for women on the same terms which men currently enjoyed - and 1909, when she helped to found the PSF. In outlining Davies’ journey towards a commitment to full-scale adult (universal) suffrage, it describes her work within the Guild, and also her collaboration with other labour movement women and organisations. And it suggests why, in her efforts to find a compromise between the limited and adult suffrage demands, at one point she proposed a suffrage reform which favoured married women over others. It goes on to explore why Davies made some of her suffrage interventions in a personal capacity rather than as WCG representative. Drawing on the organisation’s records and on published material in the women’s pages of the weekly Co-operative News, the paper discusses the major conflicts within the WCG about suffrage policy, and especially about affiliating to the PSF. These illuminate the varied currents of opinion among working class women activists about how (and sometimes even whether) to campaign for the vote.

Panel 2a: Victoria and Victorian voters

Arianne Chernock (Boston University) - Queen Victoria in the late Victorian and Edwardian Suffrage and Anti-Suffrage Campaigns

During her long life, Queen Victoria proved a lightning rod in debates about the Woman Question, especially in regards to questions of female suffrage. Nineteenth-century women’s rights activists routinely praised Victoria for providing a compelling model of female “political authority” and demonstrating that women could serve at the highest levels of government. Anti-suffragists, meanwhile, insisted that the Queen was a mere “accessory” on the national political stage, a woman who led “in a woman’s way,” by ceding her responsibilities to the men surrounding her. These debates by no means resolved with the Queen’s death, in 1901. Rather, the Edwardian period saw an intensification of exchanges about Victoria, as different factions on the right and on the left struggled to adopt her for their purposes in regards to the vote (a process further complicated by the fact that Victoria’s own condemnation of the “mad, wicked folly” of women’s political rights became public knowledge in 1902). This paper will examine the many Victorias – democratic, socialist, pacifist, imperialist, misogynist, egalitarian, elitist – that circulated in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, in the lead-up to the passage of the 1918 Reform Act. It will then reflect on what these appropriations might tell us about the divide not just between
suffragists and anti-suffragists, but also within these blocs. For even within the suffrage camp, activists seized on Victoria to express a range of views about women’s political proclivities, the gendered nature of political leadership, and the ideal political systems for female advancement.

**Ann Dingsdale (Independent Scholar)** - **Emily Davies, Women Ratepayers and the 1870 London School Board Election in Greenwich**

Emily Davies stood for election to the London School Board for the Greenwich division in 1870. Four years earlier the Women’s Suffrage Petition had been signed by some two dozen women in the area. Among these women were many who had or would have experience of heading a household, with responsibilities as a ratepayer. The 1870 London School Board Election included women ratepayers in the electorate. This paper will examine the election as perceived by Emily Davies, her male supporters and the local press. It will introduce some women in Greenwich who supported women’s suffrage in 1866. The fisherman’s widow, the milkman’s daughter, the entrepreneur inventor had ambitions to vote... How many of them were able to vote in this secret ballot in 1870 with the opportunity to elect a woman to a position of power and influence?

**Panel 2b: The women’s movement and peace activism**

**June Hannam (University of the West of England)** - **Annie Townley and Mabel Tothill: campaigning for Suffrage, Peace and Socialism in Bristol, 1912-1920s.**

This paper will focus on two socialist women in Bristol, Mabel Tothill and Annie Townley, who campaigned for women’s suffrage, peace and labour politics in the period 1912-1920s. They came from very different backgrounds. Mabel Tothill was a middle-class Quaker involved with the University Settlement. Annie Townley, the wife of a Lancashire textile worker, was a paid organiser for the Election Fighting Fund of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. And yet as members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) they worked closely together to raise the profile of women’s suffrage among working-class women and the labour movement just before the First World War and then in campaigning for peace. They retained links with non-socialist women who were suffragists and peace campaigners, but increasingly worked through the ILP to highlight the impact of the war on working-class women and the labour movement just before the First World War and then in campaigning for peace. At its conclusion Mabel Tothill’s energies were directed to support for conscientious objectors and their families. Both women gained a higher profile in the ILP and the LP during the war. At its conclusion Mabel Tothill, a LP candidate, became the first woman councillor in Bristol and Annie Townley was appointed by the LP as a paid organiser for women in the South West. This paper will examine the impact of the war and peace activism on the lives of these two women socialists, and will explore the complex ways in which they sought to pursue the
rights and specific interests of working-class women within the context of suffrage, socialist and labour politics.

Jane Grant and Helen Kay (Independent Scholars) - Politics are Personal: the Relationship Between Women of the Suffrage and Peace Movements

The role of Millicent Fawcett in the achievement of the Representation of the People Act 1918 is undisputed and is testimony to a lifetime of campaigning which continued during World War One. She and Chrystal Macmillan worked continuously from 1914 – 1918 through the Consultative Committee to monitor and challenge the Government to give women the vote.

But Millicent Fawcett was not always as progressive on other issues. In July 1914, as Vice-President of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), she and Chrystal Macmillan, IWSA Secretary, delivered a Manifesto to the foreign embassies in London urging them ‘to leave untried no method of conciliation or arbitration for arranging international differences which help to avert deluging half of the civilised world in blood’. But by 1915, Millicent Fawcett believed that the suffrage organisations should support the war effort.

When Chrystal Macmillan organised the International Congress of Women at The Hague in 1915, Millicent Fawcett banned affiliated suffrage societies from sending delegates but Chrystal Macmillan remained a staunch member of NUWSS, writing the NUWSS pamphlet ‘Shall I have the Vote?’ in 1918. At the time, relationships between working class campaigners, suffrage activists and peace campaigners became fluid. Margaret Bondfield and Sylvia Pankhurst were on the Executive of the British section of the Women’s International League; suffragette Helen Crawford and suffragists Margaret Ashton and Theodore Mary Wilson, who were leaders of the Peace Crusades, were also members of the British delegation to the second Women’s Peace Congress in 1919. The paper will explore the relationships in the light of the women’s different commitments to political, suffrage and peace activism.

Panel 2c: Tactics, strategies and social reform

Jane Robinson (Independent Scholar) – Hearts and Minds: The Great Suffragist Pilgrimage of 1913

This paper introduces one of the most inclusive and least recognised episodes of the campaign for women’s suffrage in Britain: the Great Suffragist Pilgrimage of 1913. The Great Pilgrimage was instigated by officers of the non-militant National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) to demonstrate regional support for women’s suffrage and to counteract negative publicity generated by militant members of the Women’s Social and
Political Union (WSPU). There is very little historiography associated with the Pilgrimage; this research breaks new ground to reveal a turning-point towards women’s enfranchisement through non-violent activism, credited as such by major opposing figures Herbert Asquith and Millicent Fawcett. It also identifies the importance of cross-cultural and cross-generational ‘sisterhood’ in the campaign, and a legacy of similar solidarity.

The paper explains the Pilgrimage’s genesis, organisation and personnel. Contextualised first-hand accounts and contemporary journalism describe the pilgrims’ experiences during the march; these sources, together with the records of suffrage societies across the country, inform the consideration of class, expectation and empowerment linked to the event. The political and personal impact of the march is discussed; its perception by members of the public, and the paradox suggested by the extreme violence with which these non-militant protesters were sometimes met. The paper concludes that the reach of the Great Pilgrimage extended not just across the UK, but across time; the spirit it evoked is live today, notably in the women’s marches of 2017.

Wendy Tuxill (Anglia Ruskin University) – Constance Lytton: Privilege, Protest, Prison

Lady Constance Lytton’s life was paradoxical. Although born to privilege, she cared deeply about improving prison conditions for working class women following her own imprisonment as a suffragette. No substantial analysis has been undertaken to evaluate her work on penal reform. This paper argues that penal reform is a major achievement of the women’s suffrage campaigns and analyses Lady Constance’s role in bringing that reform about. It addresses the questions, ‘What were prison conditions like before the first influx of suffragette prisoners in 1907? How did the incarceration of some 1000 women change those conditions?

Lytton’s account of her imprisonment drew international attention to the inequalities of the English prison system with dramatic effect. Prison reform was endorsed by Emmeline Pankhurst as WSPU policy. Lytton’s ideas were far-sighted: whilst highlighting the inhumane conditions experienced by working class prisoners, her writings questioned the social circumstances that caused so many impoverished women to be incarcerated and suggests how these could be addressed.

Her motivation, however, has been the subject of speculation with some biographical accounts depicting her as a self-serving masochist and as a patronising aristocrat for whom prison was merely a hobby or an anthropology experiment. It has also been claimed that Lytton’s stroke in 1912 ended her campaign for prison reform. This paper will use unpublished sources including diaries and notebooks in the family archive at Knebworth House in Hertfordshire to analyse Lady Constance Lytton’s writings on prison reform and to demonstrate that her principled commitment to such reform was sustained until her death in 1923.
Panel 3a: Feminism, Democracy and Socialism

Claire Eustance (University of Greenwich) - Building a ‘constructive revolutionary programme’: The Women’s Freedom League’s Feminist and Socialist Aspirations, 1918-1928

In the aftermath of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, the Women’s Freedom League (WFL) swiftly moved to declare their intention to continue as a mass membership, democratically governed non-party campaigning organisation of like-minded women and (later that year) men, focused on securing gender equality and wider social reform. This paper will explore the challenges that the WFL encountered in realizing these aims and how its membership responded in what was a crucial period of transition and transformation in the women’s movement, the theory and practice of feminism as well as in the British labour movement and society more generally. The League’s origins as a democratic militant women’s suffrage alternative to the autocratic WSPU has left a wealth of papers detailing discussions and debates among its members at conferences and meetings.

What emerges in 1918 are the number of attempts by the League’s still significant branch network to convey the broader interests of their members; with some branches, often those representing younger working women, demonstrating a willingness to make alliances with the labour movement and to embrace a ‘constructive revolutionary programme’. These aspirations were almost always frustrated by those members with lingering memories of being marginalized and sacrificed to party and other interests in the past. And more significant still were those powerful voices in the WFL leadership who were determined to harness their women members’ new found “power” to correct the anomalies of women’s limited enfranchisement in 1918. The unsuccessful attempts of some in the WFL to build a meaningful and equal alliance between feminism and socialism is by no means unique, but it is an area of suffrage historiography that deserves further scrutiny.

Carey Snyder (Ohio University, Athens, USA) - 'The Speediest Way to Democracy': Teresa Billington-Greig’s New Age Writings

This paper considers how Billington-Greig negotiates the relationship between sex and class equality in her suffrage writings for the socialist weekly, The New Age. In a set of six essays in 1907, Billington-Greig accuses socialists of blindly neglecting “women’s interests and needs,” and argues that removing the “sex disability” is the “speediest and most practical way to democracy.” In her 1911 three-part series, “Emancipation in a Hurry,” Billington-Greig accuses the WSPU of becoming a movement of ladies and sidelining working class concerns in its single-minded haste for the vote. Pivoting dramatically away from not just militancy, but the franchise, Billington-Greig asks later that year “whether some other movement outside politics […] would not provide a surer and speedier way” to women’s
emancipation. Snyder positions Billington-Greig’s apparent flip within the context of the waning support for women’s suffrage in The New Age.

_Lise Shapiro Sanders (Hampshire College, Amherst, USA)_ - ‘Sex Equality Versus Adult Suffrage’: Margaret Bondfield, Socialism, and Women’s Suffrage

This paper examines the suffrage platform espoused by Margaret Bondfield (1873-1953), a shop assistant-turned-union-organizer who rose to prominence in the Labour Party in the interwar years. In 1907, Bondfield and Teresa Billington-Greig held a public debate in which Bondfield argued that “titled ladies” and other prominent suffrage organizers should not attempt to gain the franchise for themselves by exploiting the concerns of working women. Moreover, she contended, true democracy would only be accomplished by recognizing the fundamental human rights of both women and men regardless of class: “I claim a vote, not because I am a female, but because I am a human being.” Bondfield’s early advocacy for universal adult suffrage prefigures her sustained commitment to advancing the twin goals of class and gender equality over a half-century of social and political activism.

_Panel 3b: It was Rarely ‘Suffrage First, Above all Else’; Women, Activism and the Vote in Ireland, 1900-1918_

While the 19th century Irish suffrage campaigns had often mirrored those of English suffragists, the new militancy of the early 20th century was complicated, in Ireland, by questions of nation, class, and identity. By 1914 and the outbreak of war, Irish feminists, faced with a polarised political climate (influenced by the campaign for Home Rule, growing militant and separatist nationalism, and trade union activism among other issues), were anxious to stake their own political claim. The divisive claims on their loyalties, whether it be suffrage first, national first, class first, meant many debates, divisions and arguments among the different women’s organisations. Many of these divisions ended with the 1916 Rising and the inclusion of equal rights for women in the Proclamation of Independence. The largest nationalist women’s organisation, Cumann na mBan, became more avowedly militant and feminist after 1916; and it is through Cumann na mBan and the republican party, Sinn Féin, that many Irish feminists sought a political platform, post 1916. In 1918, with the limited female franchise now law, the nationalist Cumann na mBan women and the militant Irish women’s Franchise League came together to campaign for the imprisoned 1916 rebel Countess Markievicz, who became the first woman to be elected to Westminster.

Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley (NUIG), Professor Linda Connolly (Maynooth University) and Dr Mary McAuliffe, (UCD) will consider first wave feminist activism in Ireland from 1900, and place the campaigns for the female franchise in the wider context of the Irishwomen’s movement, the rise of cultural nationalism, the national question of Irish self government, in particular the move from constitutional nationalism to militant, separatist nationalism, and the
influences of socialism and the campaigns for worker’s rights. We will consider the
influences the passing of the third Home Rule Bill (1912), without the inclusion of the female
franchise despite a hard campaign by Irish feminists, the participation of many working class
feminists in campaigns for workers’ rights and the 1913 Lockout, the outbreak of war in
1914 and rebellion in 1916 had on changing and radicalising the Irish women’s movement.
The part the female franchise, limited though it was, on delivering an overwhelming victory
for Sinn Fein in 1918, will also be considered. Newly released archives from the Military
Archives, new research in previously underutilised political women’s archives, and a new
emphasis on women’s contributions in the Decade of Centenaries, is helping shed new light
on the histories of the Irish women’s suffrage movement. The importance of socialism and
the involvement of working class women, the much boarder involvement of activism
women in militant nationalism, the importance of women to the 1918 Sinn Fein victory, the
promises of equality in the new imaged Republic are all issues on which our knowledge is
broadening.

Donna Gilligan (Education Officer for the National Print Museum in Dublin) - The Imagery
of Independence: National symbols and representations used by the Irish suffragists at
home and abroad

The Irish suffragists of the early twentieth century experienced difficulty in publicly
differentiating their national suffrage movement from the prominent contemporary British
campaign. While suffrage organisations such as the Irish Women’s Franchise League
admired the organisation and tactics of British groups such as the Women’s Social & Political
Union, they understood that the Irish struggle for suffrage against a backdrop of growing
nationalism was specifically unique, and they wished to be recognised as an independent
Irish group rather than an affiliate group to the British movement. Irish suffragettes were often natively viewed as anti-nationalist for prioritising suffrage over
nationalism. They were frequently negatively linked to the British suffragettes, reducing Irish
sympathies for their campaign at a time of growing nationalism and republicanism. As the
suffrage movement developed, selected imperialist English suffrage groups refused to
recognise national differences and attempted to gain control and influence over the Irish
campaign. British suffragettes can also be seen to have exploited reductive Irish visual
imagery in international processions, encouraging Irish suffragists to wear idealised
costumes as visual markers of imperialism and colonial ideals. Such progressions in the
movement led many of the Irish suffrage organisations to gradually distance and separate
themselves from the English suffrage campaign.

Contemporary imagery and records show that Irish suffragists deployed their own distinct
visual aids such as national flags, colours, dress and costume, as well as popular Celtic
Revival symbols, to craft a pictorial aesthetic which clearly publicly marked their origins and
allegiances. Irish suffragists deliberately chose to present themselves and their work to
national and international audiences in a number of ways which highlighted their
independent nationality, as well as their professional achievements, respectability and cultural connections. This presentation explores the forms of visual presentation of nationalism used by the Irish suffragists, and examines how their deliberate choices of objects and imagery served to present the Irish campaign in a distinctly national form, visually differentiating them from their British counterparts and aligning them with the imagery of the emerging republic.

Panel 3c: Religion, Politics and Woman’s Public Voice; Sarah Louise Donaldson (nee Eagleston), 1861-1950, Writer, Speaker, Campaigner.

This panel will explore the links between women’s suffrage, political activism and Christianity through aspects of the life and work of Sarah Louise Donaldson (nee Eagleston), suffragist, Christian Socialist, and feminist campaigner. Despite holding prominent offices in relevant organizations - as one of the two female Vice-Presidents of the Church League for Women’s Suffrage in 1913- President of the Women’s Labour League in 1917, and as one of the first women magistrates in 1920, she is almost unknown within suffrage and labour history. The main focus will be on Donaldson’s writing and speaking skills, and the synergies between her religious and political beliefs and activities.

Catherine Sloan, (University of Oxford) - The Making of a Suffragist

Catherine Sloan will explore the development of her writing through the Oxford High School Magazine, when she was one of the first generation of pupils at the newly-established girls’ high schools of the 1870s and 1880s. This paper will firstly suggest that the school magazine as a genre enabled young women like Eagleston to develop their confidence in expressing their opinions on a range of social and political issues. Moreover, Eagleston’s involvement went beyond contributing. Although one of the few girls from a “town” as opposed to a “gown” background, she was actively involved as editor, as well as featuring regularly in reports from the school’s debating and charitable societies. It will be suggested that this experience equipped such girls with skills which were invaluable in their social and political campaigns in later life.

Mary Clare Martin, (University of Greenwich) - Class, Gender and Labour: a Suffragist’s Perspective, 1861-1950.

Mary Clare Martin will consider the complexity of Donaldson’s approach to cross-class relationships and women’s work within the different causes she espoused, informed by Christian Socialism. Besides “war against poverty” and women’s suffrage, her activities included lecturing for the London School Board, campaigning for infant welfare, sexual health, birth control and penal reform. Her marriage to the Rev Frederic Lewis Donaldson (1860-1953), an active Christian Socialist, provided a lifelong political and religious partnership which complemented her campaigning work.
Robert Saunders, (Queen Mary, University of London) - ‘A Movement of the Holy Ghost’: The Church League for Women’s Suffrage, 1909-1918,

Robert Saunders will explore the theology, iconography and activism of the first and largest of the “religious leagues” to emerge before 1914, and Donaldson’s work within it, showing how it sits at the intersection of the histories of religion, gender and politics. Suffragists such as Donaldson grappled with anti-suffrage readings of Genesis, St Paul and the traditions of the Church to construct a Christian case for the equality of men and women. The CLWS mustered nearly 6,000 members by 1914, including at least 500 clergy and 8 bishops. Women such as Louise Creighton, Ursula Roberts and Sarah Louise Donaldson addressed meetings, wrote pamphlets and articles, and debated theology in the letters pages of the religious press. The paper serves both to locate Donaldson’s thought within its wider context, and to show how Christian suffragism can serve as a case study in the political thought of suffragism.

Plenary: Sheila Rowbotham: Suffrage links across the Atlantic from the 1880s to the early twentieth century.

Bristolian New Woman, Helena Born joined the Bristol Women’s Liberal Association in 1885. Having become a socialist, she migrated to Boston in the United States in 1890 where she continued to support women’s suffrage along with her American friend, Helen Tufts. Both women combined the demand for political rights with broader aspects of individual and social emancipation. After Helena Born’s death Helen Tufts remained abreast with the British suffrage movement.

Roundtable 4a: Helen Antrobus et al (People’s History Museum Panel) - Beyond the Militant Myth: The Heritage Approach to the Centenary.

Museums, galleries and archives have a huge impact on how history, particularly political history, is told. The story of women’s suffrage has been an intrinsic part of national and local heritage institutions for years – in 2018, these collections and narratives are being turned into commemorative programmes of exhibitions and events, creating sites dedicated to sharing the story of the suffrage movement across the country.

Our panel would offer discussion and debate as to where the woman’s suffrage movement and the left, particularly the working class, fit into these exhibitions, and if indeed, they have a place at all. The story of the Pankhursts have dominated popular culture and memory, whilst the collections, and subsequently the narratives of working class campaigners and ‘foot-soldiers’ are often disregarded. We will discuss how museums and heritage institutions are combatting the popular narratives of ‘suffragette’ militant history and are subsequently using
innovative curatorial approaches to tell a richer, more diverse side of the story. We will discuss how this translates into engaging audiences and bringing in researchers to institutions.

2018 will leave a powerful legacy for many heritage institutions. The panel will be able to give insight into how acknowledging these forgotten histories and narratives of the suffragist movement and the stories of working class women will allow us to recognise gaps in collections, permanent displays, and community engagement, and help us to make the changes needed in order to tell a more inclusive history of women’s suffrage.

Panel 4b: Women’s suffrage and theatre

Sos Eltis (Brasenose College, Oxford University, UK) - ‘Long Live the Hen’s Union!’: Class Interests and the Politics of Unity in Pre-War Feminist Theatre

In 1913, Inez Bensusan announced that an opening production of the newly founded Woman’s Theatre would be Eugène Brieux's Femme seule – a highly unusual choice for Bensusan’s feminist project given not only its male authorship but its depiction of male trade unionists’ opposition to the extension of women’s employment rights. Treating a range of plays from the middle-class focused works of Cicely Hamilton and Elizabeth Robins, to the popular East End genre of ‘bad girl melodrama’ by the Melville brothers, this paper traces the ways in which playwrights attempted to bridge the gap between middle-class and working-class experiences and interests. As theatre was co-opted as part of the war effort, employment conditions and pay were largely set aside by playwrights, until the later years of the war produced plays that provided a new vision of cross-gender alliances to challenge the complacency and power of employers.

Naomi Paxton (University of Lincoln and Vote 100) - ‘Very Much Alive and Kicking’: the Actresses’ Franchise League from 1914-1928.

On the 24th October 1928 the Actresses' Franchise League took part in the victory reception held by the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee to celebrate the passing of the Representation of the People Act which finally gave women the vote on the same terms as men. One of the most popular suffrage plays of the pre-war period, Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John's 'How The Vote Was Won' (1909), was performed by some of the original cast, but this event was not the League’s swansong. Throughout the war years and the 1920s, the League had maintained its work with and for the suffrage societies and used its extensive networks in the theatre industry to run projects creating and championing new employment opportunities for women. These projects and their national and international reach show the organisation to have been not only part of the continued fight for the vote, but also engaged in attempts to tackle the wider social issues contributing to women’s inequality. In all, the Actresses' Franchise League spent only six of their 50 years as an organisation producing what has been known as 'suffrage theatre' - this paper will explore
the League’s work from the outbreak of war until that 1928 victory performance though fourteen years of activism, diversification and strategic campaigning.

Public Lecture, Cambridge University Library

Elizabeth Crawford, Pictures and Politics: the art of suffrage propaganda

The early-20th-century women’s suffrage campaign was the most visual of all those conducted by contemporary pressure groups. This illustrated talk will discuss the wide range of art and artefacts - posters, postcards, cartoons, banners, china, and jewellery – created by artists sympathetic to the suffrage cause and reveal something of their creators, many of whose lives have hitherto been un-regarded.