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**The Militant Suffragette: memoir of a political movement or a true crime tale?**

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper offers a political memoir, as told through the popular press and popular publishing, focusing on the right of women to vote and explores the idea of classifying this memoir as a true crime tale highlighting the radical militancy of some suffragettes. It uses the resources of the State Library of New South Wales to look at the suffragette movement in Australia, explores the efforts of the international movement in the early decades of the twentieth century and asserts that the right to vote was about more than the selection of representation. Voting in plebiscites and referenda facilitates various opportunities for women to have a say in how Australians live and, in the case of conscription, how some Australians might die.*

**KEYWORDS**

biography  
education  
gender  
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suffragettes  
World War I

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper began as an andragogical teaching tool; a case study to supplement a course for experienced researchers on the utilization of eResources available through the State Library of New South Wales. In 2015, in response to requests from Library clients, it was decided to devise and deploy a three-part training program covering history and social sciences, online literature and history primary resources, and newspapers. Each session follows a similar format: an overview of resources available, a case study demonstrating the potential of these resources to inform a variety of research inquiries and a ‘hands-on’ session supported by specialist librarians, allowing participants to undertake searches of relevance to their personal projects.

To demonstrate the power of the resources available – including subscription databases, eBooks online and digital surrogates from the Library’s suite of original materials– it was agreed that a conference paper would be presented based exclusively upon these resources. The

topic selected was ‘The Militant Suffragette’. This paper tells stories from the vast collections of the State Library of New South Wales of the early efforts of the suffragette movement in Australia and highlights the militant (sometimes described as criminal) nature of the international suffragette movement. This is explored through the contemporaneous reporting of various suffragette moments and contemporary, twentieth and twentieth-century, historical analyses on the work of the suffragettes. Moreover, this paper looks at how the right to vote in Australia offered opportunities to select representation and contribute to broader decision-making processes.

### **THE SUFFRAGETTES: EARLY AUSTRALIAN EFFORTS**

The achievement of universal suffrage in Australia was a staggered process. Different states held different views on the matter of who had and did not have the right to vote. With Federation came a Constitution that provided for women to vote at the federal level but did not automatically allow women to vote at local or state levels of government. Women were granted the vote in South Australia in 1895 and Western Australia in 1899. In 1902 the Constitution granted all women the right to vote but this was not adopted at a state level until 1903 in Tasmania, 1905 in Queensland and 1908 in Victoria (Australian Electoral Commission 2015). Facts, such as these, are relatively easy to find sources for; unpacking the story around such facts requires a more concentrated effort. An example of this type of effort is found in the following passages.

The campaign for suffrage in Australia did not reach the intensity of the campaign in England but was not without its controversies. Men in Australia objected to women being given the vote on two grounds. First, women would lose their femininity and domesticity if allowed to vote and participate in political life. Second, having the right to vote would encourage women to sympathise with reactionary political parties leading to a conservative agenda that would outlaw traditional male pastimes of drinking and gambling (Prezeworski 2009; Sammut 2011). Reflecting these fears, the women campaigning for suffrage in Australia experienced some opposition to their cause in the popular press. The stereotype of the ‘New Woman’ was applied to Australian suffragettes and these campaigners became the source of much ridicule.

As Jeremy Sammut explores in ‘Why Women Really got the Vote’, the *Bulletin* published many cartoons that demonized the nineteenth-century image of the ‘New Woman’, one who participated in the paid workforce and married at a later age. He contends that: ‘New Women who campaigned [...] for the vote were lampooned as divided-skirt wearing harridans’

(2011: 44). The *Bulletin* capitalized on fears that allowing women to be involved in political life would lead them to neglect the domestic sphere.

While some facets of the printed press no doubt peddled the masculinist agenda, women campaigning for the vote in Australia also made great use of the printed press for themselves. Jennie Scott Griffiths, for example, who wrote for the *Australian Women's Weekly*, immediately identified herself in the publication as a supporter of women's rights and suffrage (Kirkby 2013: 91). Scott Griffiths used her magazine to champion women's rights long after suffrage had been achieved. Similarly *Dawn*, a magazine (published in Sydney) employing only women and Vida Goldstein's *Australian Woman's Sphere* (published in Melbourne) also took up the issues of women's rights and the right to vote (Kirkby 2013). Women at this time were slowly gaining a voice in Australian public life and their involvement in print journalism further helped the campaign for suffrage during the 1890s and early 1900s.

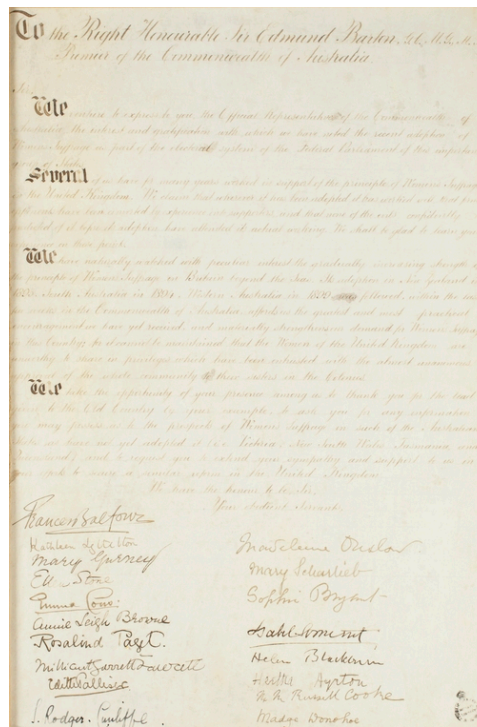


Figure 1: A Petition, from British Suffragettes, to Australia's First Prime Minister Edmund Barton [Manuscript] Sydney: Mitchell Library, D386

From newspaper articles on Trove<sup>1</sup> it can be ascertained that coverage of meetings for the Women's Suffrage League featured in major newspapers like the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Adelaide Advertiser*. Branches of the Women's Suffrage League were formed in

<sup>1</sup> Trove (<http://trove.nla.gov.au>), hosted by the National Library of Australia, provides a federated search tool for digital and physical collections across Australia and facilitates online access to the Australian Newspapers Digitization Program (<https://www.nla.gov.au/content/newspaper-digitisation-program>).

Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales to further the cause of winning the right to vote for women. The fact that the mainstream press provided coverage for the cause of these suffrage leagues and their members is further evidence that there was some support for suffrage in the Australian media during the nineteenth century. This may have helped the battle for the right to vote to be won more easily for women in Australia than in other countries such as England and the United States of America.

Patricia Grimshaw adds that concerns about race, due to immigration from the Gold Rush and attitudes towards the Aboriginal people, precipitated colonial anxieties that also prompted support for women's enfranchisement (2000). According to Grimshaw, women were seen as 'the honoured mothers of future white citizens' and because of this esteemed position it was deemed acceptable for them to be given the right to vote (Grimshaw 2000: 560). Due to social and political forces such as these, scholars who write about the suffragette movement argue that Australian women did not face the same obstacles to achieving the vote as their counterparts in England and America (Millar 2003; Caine 2004). Writing of the militant struggles for suffrage in Britain, Barbara Caine describes the campaign in Australia as having occurred in 'sharp contrast' to what was happening in England (2004: 13). It was a brief campaign, she writes, and fought on a 'much smaller-scale' (2004: 13). However, as Sammut has stated, 'Australian suffragettes campaigned long and hard to overcome male-chauvinist stigmas against women', including the view that women were 'irrational' and somehow a lesser class of human being (2011: 42), despite the obvious efficiency and professionalism with which women executed the components of the suffragette campaign.

One of the more significant contributions of Australian women to the suffrage movement was seen later, when a number of Australian women went to London and participated in the British suffragettes' militant campaigns. Bessie Rischbieth, Vida Goldstein, Muriel Matters, Jessie Street and Alice Henry were among suffragettes from Australia who joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in their fight to win the vote for women in Britain. As Carly Millar posits, Australian women at this time were seen to be progressive and modern with something to teach their British sisters (2003). By this stage they had already won the right to vote in their own country, ahead of women in Britain. Hence, while the suffragettes of Australia may have fought a modest battle on the home front many went on to become involved in the militant campaigns overseas and brought a renewed enthusiasm for the burgeoning feminist movement of the early 1900s back with them to Australia.

## **THE SUFFRAGETTES: CONTINUED INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS**

On the international stage, the suffragette movement continued forward with implacable momentum. Only universal suffrage would suffice. Some efforts to secure the vote were confrontational - 'political manipulation and acts of destructive violence add[ed] emphasis and sinister significance to this war of words' (Drake 1914: 771). This militancy – including the smashing of shop windows, the setting of empty buildings alight and the use of 'acid to burn suffragist slogans into the golf courses used by prominent Liberal politicians' (Richards 2014: 5) – was seen as a natural course of action by some and 'shocking' by others and deepened the divide between those for and against universal enfranchisement (Overton 1911: 275).

Some suggested the inevitability of physical conflicts as a natural extension of ignored political lobbying, noting that the violence 'is understood, their action is excusable, and perhaps justifiable' (Patten 1910: 111). For others, such behaviour was clearly situated as criminal, requiring punishments delivered with the full force of the law. These competing views – political movement versus true crime tale – would naturally resolve alongside the granting of universal suffrage. The criminal-based activities of many suffragettes would reduce and ultimately cease with one writer noting: 'The militant era of the woman suffrage movement will pass into history [...remembered as] a thrilling period in the record of the woman's cause' (Stewart 1912: 123).

Interestingly, women's contributions to the war effort, in numerous ways, would be reflected in the military motifs deployed in various essays on the militant suffragette movement such as G.H. Powell's 'Man and Woman after the War':

A vast army, more numerous than many of us believed to be discoverable, has come forward, fired by the patriotic enthusiasm of the moment, equipped with the normal feminine allowance of energy, skill, strength, and beauty, to take the place of man. (1989: 241)

Of particular importance is the way that the suffragette movement – in its multiple guises of militant and passive – crossed class lines with agitation 'coming from the hearts of women of all classes – the mill girl, the university woman, the member of the nobility' (Paul 1910: 23). Examples of this can be seen in mass demonstrations and rallies and in the lengthy articles of the Duchess of Marlborough, who wrote that women were 'not the fighting portion of the race, but they were the organizers, custodians, guardians and householders, transmitters of name and fortune' (1909: 11).

In numerous instances, gender lines were also crossed by men who wrote openly in

support of women. Walter Rauschenbusch, though obviously concerned about changes to ‘fashions in dress, the spread of smoking and drinking among society women, the forwardness of half-grown girls, the conscious exposure at summer resorts, and the success of sex novels’ (1913: 199), also asserted that: ‘Women have arrived – in industry, in education, in politics. They pervade all domains of life, not passively as adjuncts, but with a sense of equal rights and a feeling of new-found destiny’ (1913: 195). Some male commentators were not quite so liberal, complaining that:

It is Society, omnipotent Society, that connects beard with ballot, and decrees not only what age, or estate, or race, but also which sex, shall exercise it; having as jealous an eye to the honor of women as to the strength of men in its contemplation of the supreme welfare of the whole community. If Society has not given the ballot to woman, it is because it conceives her duty perfect without functions of public government. (Holland 1909: 273)

Gender lines would again be crossed with some women, including American Annie Nathan Meyer, failing to enthusiastically embrace the granting of universal suffrage, questioning its value:

What could the sex bring to the service of the state to offset the degeneration of public life, to offset the indifference, the sloth, the moral cowardice, the greed, the dishonesty that are seriously menacing the moral life of our Republic?’ (1904: 104)

One of the more striking features of the suffragette moment was not however the class or gender lines crossed by these demands for equality but the international lines. Many American lobbyists, challenged by conflicting legislation across the Union (Seawell 1914: 374), drew on international success stories: ‘An estimate of the militant suffrage movement should be based, not on mere study of books, but on a first-hand acquaintance with the movement itself in England’ (Winsor 1914: 134). Arguments, including ‘that women suffer under disabilities that only the ballot can remedy’ (Turner 1913: 597), were also borrowed.

These rationales for change were expanded upon by many including Thomas Reed Powell, a constitutional law expert at Columbia University, who observed that ‘It is well to bear in mind that any governmental mechanism is a human contrivance, subject to such alteration as human judgement dictates’ and that ‘control by the few has not proved a satisfactory safeguard of the interests of the many’ (1914: 73-74, 76). The Antipodes were also cited as exemplary practice as ‘the women of New Zealand have possessed the Municipal

suffrage since 1886' and this 'situation is duplicated in Australia. The women in its six States have had Municipal suffrage for twenty-five or thirty years' (Harper 1907: 55).

### **MORE THAN THE SELECTION OF REPRESENTATION**

Suffrage was more than the selection of representation at local, state and federal levels of government. '[T]he franchise was the lever with which women could lift all other reform moments' including movements for peace and war (Anthony 1902: 806): with the right to vote at elections came the right to vote at plebiscites and referenda, including on matters as critical as conscription. Not being able to vote on an issue of such national importance was an extension of conservative arguments that '[w]hether more or less militant that it was, society is still founded on force, and because women are not as strong as men, men will not give them the vote. Besides it is only right, since they can not fight, they should not vote.' (Parsons 1915: 44). Notions of strength were rebutted by ideas that 'women, though physically weaker, appear to be in a sense constitutionally stronger, to have a more tenacious hold on life than men' (Hutchins 1909: 209). Yet, as this paper has clearly outlined women were (and continue to be) strong and tenacious, more than capable of fighting for causes of national significance and engaging in militant behaviour.

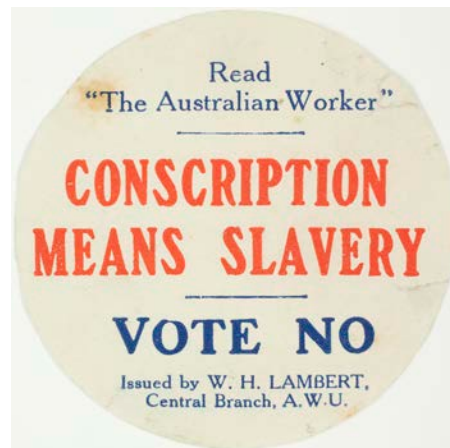


Figure 2: *Read the Australian Worker – Conscription Means Slavery, Vote No* [sticker]  
Sydney: Mitchell Library, PXA 623 / 1-5.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has unpacked, very briefly, some fragments from the story of the militant suffragette: a political, occasionally criminal, memoir of an important political movement. The stories include women who responded to claims that:

[t]o set class against class is bad, to set race against race is worse, to set religion against religion is even more perilous; but to set sex against sex is a degradation so deep that political polemics can no further go. (Abbott 1910: 29)

These women also called: ‘Mothers, wives, sisters, I urge you not to allow yourselves to be enticed into assuming functions for which you have no inclination’ (Abbott 1910: 32). This article has, too, looked at some of the extensions of liberty afforded through the right to vote including lobbying and having a voice heard in plebiscites and referenda. These stories have been told through the extraordinary digital and digitised resources of the State Library of New South Wales.

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