

Harold L. Smith. *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866-1928.* London and New York: Longman, 1998. vii + 122 pp. \$11.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-29811-8.



Reviewed by Amy McCandless

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In Britain, as in the United States, the attainment of women's suffrage came to be seen as the penultimate symbol of equal rights. But giving substance to that symbol proved difficult and at times divisive. Suffragists disagreed on the basis of their claims for political power, on the means to achieve the franchise, on the nature and qualifications of the electorate, and on the wider social consequences of political reform. As Harold Smith's examination of the British women's suffrage campaign from its beginnings in 1866 to the passage of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1928 demonstrates, suffragist philosophies and practices were shaped by factors of gender, class, nationalist identity, and party allegiance.

The campaign for the franchise cannot, Smith stresses, be separated from larger women's issues or concerns: "Women did not seek the vote solely to gain equal citizenship rights, but as a means to the political power necessary to transform gender structures" (p. 3). Thus, an understanding of contemporary gender identities, roles, and relations is crucial to an analysis of the suffrage movement.

Building on the work of historians such as Sandra Holton, Judith Walkowitz, Brian Harrison, David Rubenstein, and Philippa Levine, Smith finds that involvement in various Victorian reform causes gave women a sense of gender consciousness that co-existed with and often overrode their sense of class and party loyalty. This did not mean that suffragists all possessed the same view of woman's nature. Some argued the necessity of the franchise from the premise of gender "difference"; others, from the assumption of basic human equality. Whether they believed that women had the same inherent rights as men or whether they thought that women had unique concerns as wives and mothers, by the turn of the twentieth century diverse groups of women had concluded that the world would be a better place if they possessed the franchise.

Gender, of course, was not the only explanation for women's disadvantaged status. Class was another factor which colored many individuals' perception of the movement. Since the franchise was based on property qualifications, demands that women be granted suffrage on the same

terms as men would primarily benefit women from the upper and middle classes, and, indeed, it was not until the 1890s that working-class women became active in the movement. Although it would later forsake its Labour roots, the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) had its origins as an Independent Labour Party pressure group. Similarly, National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) members in Northern England and Scotland had numerous working-class organizers who urged closer ties with the Labour Party.

While suffragists sought support across the political spectrum, the major political parties worried about the impact of women's votes on electoral outcomes. Liberals preferred reforms that would make the franchise more democratic generally, a move which would not only enfranchise women but would also expand the number of Liberal male voters. They feared that the institution of "equal suffrage" or an extension of the suffrage to women based on existing property qualifications would increase the size of the Conservative electorate. Conservatives, also concerned with their own political fortunes, tended to support equal suffrage, if they supported women's suffrage at all. Although the leader of the NUWSS, Millicent Fawcett, and most NUWSS members came from Liberal backgrounds, Asquith's disdain for women's suffrage and his government's failure to deal forthrightly with the issue led many in the organization to endorse Labour candidates. Here, too, allegiances were complicated by the competing interests of class, gender, and party allegiance. The Labour Party included many of the earliest and most consistent supports of women's suffrage, but it did not consider gender issues its first priority. In fact, many party leaders were uncomfortable with the feminism of suffrage proponents, believing that "they would encourage a gender consciousness that would undercut Labour's class-based ideology" (p. 73). This was not an unfounded fear. Both the NUWSS and the WSPU put the interests of women above those of class and

party, and their membership roles included women from diverse social and political backgrounds.

The goals and methods of British suffragists reflected this diversity. Too many studies of the woman's suffrage movement, Smith believes, have focused on the militant suffragettes of the WSPU and its flamboyant leaders, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, and thus have ignored the vital contributions of other groups and individuals who, though considered less newsworthy, were in fact more influential in shaping the goals and methods of the movement. Smith considers the publication of Sandra Holton's *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), which focuses on the NUWSS, an important "turning-point" in the historiography of the movement. Holton argues persuasively, Smith contends, that it was the NUWSS alliance with Labour in the years before World War I, not the militancy of the WSPU, that increased government commitment to and public interest in suffrage reform.

Smith also disagrees with those who argue that the campaign for women's suffrage virtually came to a halt during World War I. Although he concedes that the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 led to fissures within the various suffrage organizations, Smith concurs with historians such as Brian Harrison that the war years witnessed the removal of "the main obstacles to reform ... the WSPU abandoned militancy; Asquith resigned as prime minister in 1916; and the formation of a coalition government removed the issue from overt party politics" (p. 55). The women's suffrage clause in the Representation of the People Bill of 1918 reflected significant compromises worked out between the government and the NUWSS during the war years. The legislation did not extend the franchise to women on equal terms with men: women had to be aged thirty or above *and* local government electors or the wives of such electors; men only had to be aged twenty-one or above *or*

military veterans aged nineteen or above. Women who had served their country as munitions workers and who were typically under thirty and unmarried were not enfranchised by the measure. Thus, Smith sees little evidence for some historians' contention that the suffrage was conceded as a reward for women's contribution to the war effort. Generally speaking, the new female electorate was middle-class, middle-aged, and Conservative.

The equalization of the franchise in 1928 also involved considerable effort on the part of diverse individuals and groups. The NUWSS reorganized as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and was joined by Lady Rhonda's Six Point Group and Lady Astor's Consultative Committee of Women's Organizations in pressuring for a further extension of the franchise; the Labour Party restructured its executive committee to involve more women and called for equal suffrage legislation in its election manifestos; the Conservative Party created its own women's organization and also restructured its governing bodies to include women. But, as before, competing party and class interests made it difficult for women to present a united front. In fact, equal suffrage advocates often played up these differences among women to assure opponents that women would not "vote as a bloc for gender reforms" (p. 81). The achievement of the equal franchise in 1928 was viewed by many activists as a "mixed blessing": women from diverse backgrounds had come together to effect reform, but once the vote had been gained, activists went their own ways once more. The women's suffrage campaign in Britain, Smith concludes, illustrates the "difficulty of using political action to bring about gender reform ..." (p. 84).

Smith's coverage of the campaign outside of England is the least satisfactory aspect of the book. Despite his title, Smith is primarily concerned with the English movement. There is only a paragraph on Welsh suffragists, two on Scottish

suffragists, and none on Irish suffragists. Nor is there much effort to put developments in England in the wider context of British or imperial history. For all of its historical weaknesses, one of the most interesting facets of George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* was the way in which he connected working-class, Irish, and radical feminist dissent. Subsequent scholars such as Leah Levenson, Kenneth Brown, Sheila Rowbotham, Pamela Graves, and Johanna Alberti have all demonstrated the ways in which Irish nationalism and/or class interests modified gender politics. Smith does this with class, but not with nationality. Irish suffragists split, not only over the war, but over the issue of independence from Great Britain. English suffragists, too, were affected by events in Ireland. Charlotte Despard one of the individuals Smith profiles in his glossary, was a socialist and Sinn Fein supporter; Despard and Sylvia Pankhurst's public defense of Irish trade unionist James Larkin infuriated Christabel Pankhurst and contributed to Sylvia's expulsion from the WSPU. A number of Irish nationalists, such as James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen Army, were advocates of women's suffrage. One of the promises made by the Irish republicans who participated in the Easter Rising of 1916 was equal citizenship rights for women, and the enfranchisement of women accompanied the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Given the sheer number of Scottish women involved in suffragist activity and the strong connection between Scottish Labour leaders and suffragists, it would be useful to have more information on the Scottish contribution to franchise reform as well. The English focus of Smith's study does, of course, reflect the historiographical bias. As he himself concedes, "Historians have only recently begun to explore the implications of national identity for the women's suffrage movement" (p. 24).

The thirty-three primary documents in the volume include the speeches, personal letters, and publications of suffrage leaders such as Millicent Fawcett, Christabel Pankhurst, and Eleanor Rath-

bone; memoranda from various government officials; and selections from suffragist and anti-suffragist publications. As is common in all the Seminar Studies series, documents are briefly summarized in the text, and bracketed numbers refer the reader to the location of the source. The excerpts are too short to stimulate any extended discussion of the issues involved, but they do reflect the variety of opinion which characterized the suffrage campaign.

To be fair, Smith's coverage of the movement is limited by the specifications for the volume's series. Seminar Studies in History are designed to introduce the non-specialist to important scholarly issues in British and European history. Authors are expected to provide a narrative of historical developments, to summarize historians' treatment of these topics, and to include a selection of primary documents on the subject. The text is seldom more than one hundred pages. With such a structure, analysis loses out to synthesis, the trees to the forest. Given these limitations, Smith's synthesis is quite good. The book is well-researched, well-organized, and well-written. It is the sort of work which undergraduates will love, highlighting as it does the major issues, interpretations, and documents of the woman's suffrage movement in Britain. For the more advanced student, it is a good introduction to the topic, providing suggestions for further reading and future research.

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