
VOTES FOR WOMEN

This book is dedicated to the memory of all the suffragettes and suffragists who did right and persisted knowing Failure was Impossible.

Consultant: June Purvis, Emeritus Professor of Women's
and Gender History at the University of Portsmouth

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SUFFRAGETTE

THE BATTLE FOR EQUALITY

David Roberts

TWO HOOTS

Courage calls to courage everywhere,
and its voice cannot be denied.

MILLICENT GARRETT FAWCETT

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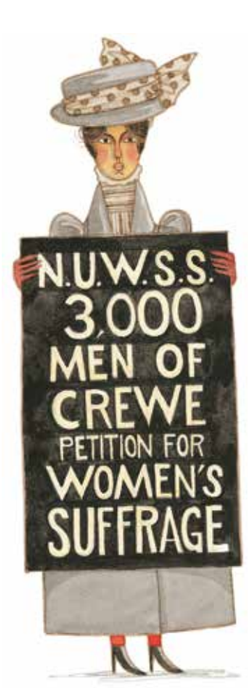


Foreword

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN NORTHEAST ENGLAND IN THE 1980s, I DIDN'T HEAR A LOT ABOUT THE SUFFRAGETTES.

If you'd asked me to name one, I'm quite sure Winifred Banks, the mother from the film *Mary Poppins*, would have been the only name I could call to mind – and to be honest, I wasn't all that keen on her. With her upper-class accent, fancy clothes and a giant house that looked like a wedding cake (it literally contained a magical nanny to look after her children while she went off on suffragette marches), she was nothing like any of the mothers I knew. In *Mary Poppins*, Mrs Banks is portrayed as a rather spoilt, distracted, neglectful wife and mother, busily and selfishly devoted to a cause that is invisible and seems irrelevant to those closest to her.

I didn't know then that this was an entirely typical (and typically inaccurate) depiction of the women who – over one hundred years ago – risked so much to fight for the right to vote. I didn't realize how cruelly unfair Victorian society was to women and girls. (I didn't realize how unfair the society I was growing up in was to women and girls either, but that's another story.)

The book in your hands is an introduction to some of the people who fought to change that, and succeeded. They were quite unlike Winifred Banks. Whereas she was spoilt, they were willing to use whatever privileges they had to fight for equality (check out Princess Sophia Duleep Singh in the chapter 'The Rebel Princess').

Mrs Banks was posh, and although some of the real suffragettes were posh too, many came from other backgrounds and did all sorts of different jobs, which helped them win the vote in the end (as you'll read in the chapter 'Canaries and Penguins Help Win the War').

Mrs Banks came across as a bit wet, but the suffragettes were tough: like Edith Garrud – a ju-jitsu expert and leader of suffragette bodyguards the Amazons – and the many others who suffered the torture of force-feeding while in prison for their protests. Mrs Banks seemed to pay little attention to her children, but the suffragette movement was led by one of the most famous mother–daughter dynasties in British history, the Pankhursts.

In the early 1990s, when I was a teenager, feminism was still unfashionable. But then, the feminist punk-music movement riot grrrl came along. Its empowering message, songs and visual language – slogans, badges, banners and home-printed 'fanzines' – captured my imagination. I started a band with friends, and it changed our lives.

I wish I had understood sooner that the call to use our voices had reached us using the very tools the campaigners of the women's suffrage movement pioneered. They too had badges and slogans – including 'Votes for Women', 'Deeds, Not Words' and 'Dare to Be Free' – which they displayed on banners. They too published their own newspapers, including *The Suffragette*, *Votes for Women* and *The Vote*: anything to spread the word and attract more supporters.

The women in this book may be illustrations, but they are not caricatures. They were real and complicated. We remember them as winners, but they often failed. Their victories were rarely glorious – more often they were gradual, small or compromised. They argued passionately for their cause, but sometimes fought among themselves. They made mistakes. Their views were opposed by some of the most important people in the country (plenty of whom were women themselves).

We look back at the lives of the women (and men) of the women's suffrage movement knowing that they would win their fight and that history would show their cause was just, but they had no guarantee of this at the time. One of the many lessons they can teach us is that this is precisely what progress looks like when you're in the middle of making it happen – unlikely, slow, messy, complicated and imperfect. They can teach us that it's OK for people to be those things sometimes, too.

Enjoy this beautiful book. I hope it inspires you to do your imperfect best to make the world a better place.

Lauren Laverne

Introduction

UNTIL I WAS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD, I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE SUFFRAGETTES.

The year was 1984 and my history teacher, Mrs Pile, informed the class that for our end-of-year exam we had to write and illustrate a project on a topic we had studied during the year. Had I heard right? Illustrate! I was thrilled: anything that meant I could draw was a bonus.

A collection of faded old history books on a variety of subjects was scattered on the teacher's desk, and one by one we each went up to choose a book on which to base our project. Amid the books about Humphry Davy, Edward Jenner and Isambard Kingdom Brunel was a book that caught my eye. It had a black-and-white photograph on the cover showing two women in prison uniform: dark dresses covered in white arrows, aprons tied around their waists, mop caps on their heads. They stood arm in arm and above them the title read *The Suffragettes*.

Who were these people? What was a 'suffragette'? And what terrible crime had they committed that they had been sent to prison? I took the book eagerly and turned straight to the bit in the middle where the pictures were. Slowly the story revealed itself.

These were Edwardian ladies of the early 1900s who had protested and battled with the government of their day to win 'the Vote'. They had smashed stuff up, burned stuff down and even died to be given equal political rights with men. I was captivated. Their struggle for equality really spoke to me.

Most of my friends were girls, but I am sure back then not many of them would have called themselves feminists. Being a teenage boy, I certainly didn't realize I could call *myself* a feminist. But I had a very strong sense of injustice at the way boys and girls were treated differently.

In those days, the gender divide was still very stark: at school, boys played football, girls played netball; girls did needlework, boys did metalwork. Why? I would have been much more at home in the needlework class than doing metalwork, and I know that some of my female friends longed to be on the football team. But those options just weren't available to us, or if they were, not many people would want to stand out by choosing them.

The expectation for boys and girls to fit into their gender stereotypes seemed to me ridiculous, and so unfair. One friend of mine who did proudly call herself a feminist would always speak out if she felt she was being dismissed, stereotyped or patronized because she was a girl, but often her protest was met with groans from teachers and pupils alike.

Our class at school had never studied the suffragettes in history, or in any other lesson for that matter, so I have no idea why that book was on the teacher's desk. It's a mystery. But it started in me a lifelong interest and respect for this group of women who had stood up to the men in power and begun to change the way society viewed their gender and the way it restricted their lives, ambitions and right to be seen as equal citizens with each other and with men.

More than thirty years after I wrote my school project, I have delved back into it and learned so much more about the campaign for women's suffrage. Of course, illustrating this book has been enormous fun, researching amid the treasure trove of newspaper reports, photographs, posters and postcards that the Internet has made readily available. I have interpreted some of these images to make my own illustrations, and have enjoyed visualizing scenes from some of the stories I've read for which there were no photographs.

Stories like Mary Leigh hurling slates off a rooftop at the Prime Minister's car in Birmingham. Or Miss Spark and Miss Shaw barricading themselves in at the top of the Monument tower in London in order to unfurl a massive banner that read 'Death or Victory' before showering the astounded crowds below with hundreds of pamphlets declaring 'Votes for Women'. Or the fearless Muriel Matters being pelted with rotten fish as she gave a speech in front of a rowdy crowd of men.

I am not an expert, more of an enthusiast, inspired by a diverse group of people, both suffragists and suffragettes, courageous, determined, peaceful and militant, all focused on one thing: the right to vote.

One hundred years since women first won the right to vote, we continue to challenge ourselves on gender equality and the expectations and roles of women and men. Slowly we chip away at the limitations and barriers to equality that previous generations, and many people still today, suffered and suffer. Femininity does not equal weakness, and gender equality benefits everyone.

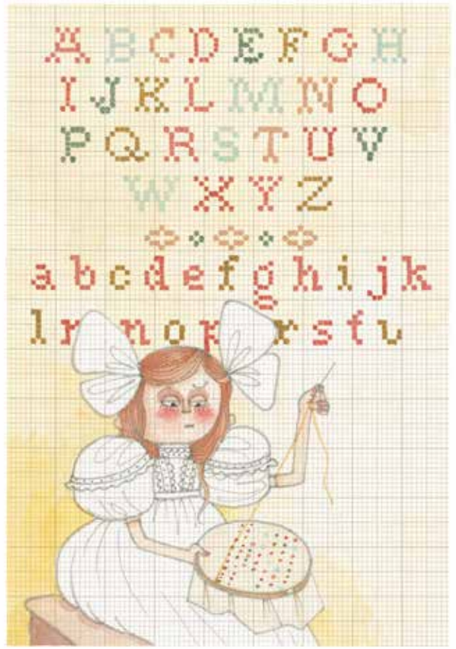
The campaigners for women's suffrage understood that. Here are some of their extraordinary stories.

David Roberts

A Man's World

SO WHY WEREN'T WOMEN ALLOWED TO VOTE? IT'S SAD TO SAY, BUT THROUGHOUT HISTORY, BOTH IN THE UK AND IN MANY OTHER PLACES AROUND THE WORLD, WOMEN AND GIRLS WERE THOUGHT OF AS BEING WEAK AND EVEN A BIT SILLY, CAPABLE ONLY OF BRINGING UP CHILDREN AND BEING GOOD HOUSEWIVES.

A woman wasn't considered capable of making major decisions even about her own life, and certainly not about the way the country should be governed. Men were expected to make those decisions. Men were expected to be in charge. So men took control and made all the rules. Often the rules they made favoured other men who were just like them, however unfair that might be. For instance, even by the mid-nineteenth century, the Victorians didn't bother to educate girls the same way they would educate boys. Some girls would have had some sort of education, but only if they were rich, and either went to a private girls' school or had a governess to teach them at home. Education was expensive, and a path to a profession, a career and an intellectual mind: the things a *boy* needed to get on in life, and not considered the concern of girls.



In 1870, a law was passed that made school free. In 1880, schooling was made compulsory up to the age of ten, then eleven in 1893, and fourteen in 1899. But this did not represent as much progress for girls as you might think. Girls were often kept at home on washdays or other days to help around the house. And it is not just going to school but what is being taught there that matters. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, girls traditionally learned cookery, needle-work and general domestic duties: all great skills, but if these subjects are seen as 'girl only' subjects, then it is clear that a girl is being trained to be no more than a good housewife, while the boys are being encouraged to expand their minds and prepare for adult life beyond the home.

As time moved on, girls' education did get better, but progress was frustratingly slow. University places for women were rare, and even if she did get a place to study a subject like medicine or law, which for a man might become his profession, a woman wouldn't be allowed to work as a doctor or a lawyer after she graduated. Women weren't allowed to be doctors until 1876, or lawyers until 1922.

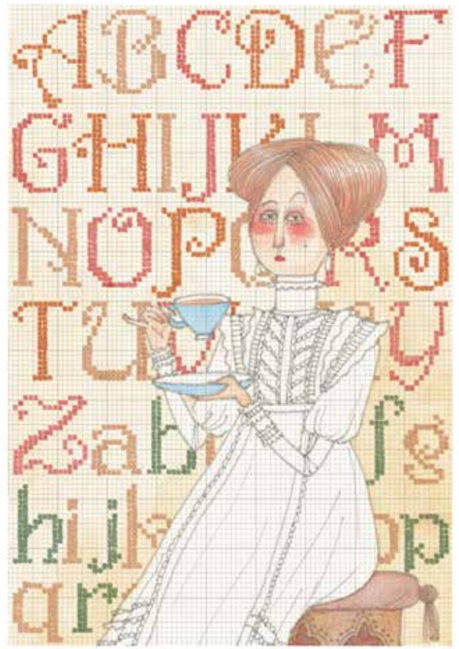
But university was in any case out of reach for most people, women or men: only the wealthy could afford it.

For most of the population, life was tough. Men and women worked long hours as servants or in factories, down mines or as farm labourers. The work was not only hard, it was often dangerous, and pay was low.

To make matters worse for women, their pay was even lower than that of men. A woman could not expect to be paid the same wage as a man, even if they were doing the same job. And most often she still had to go home after a hard day's work and clean the house and cook the meal.

But unequal pay, an issue for many even today, was just one of many shocking inequalities for women at this time.

If a woman got married, she had to promise to 'obey' her husband in her marriage vows, but a man never had to promise to obey his wife. Being married meant she gave up what few rights she did have as a single woman: a wife was 'owned' by her husband. He also owned all her wealth and property. Even if the home they lived in together had belonged to her before she got married, her husband could boot her out on the street without a penny if he wanted to divorce her. She, on the other hand, could not even divorce him without his agreement.



A woman had no legal rights over her own children until 1839, when a law was passed to give a woman the right to apply for custody (or guardianship) of her children if they were under the age of seven. The same law also gave her the right to apply for access to her children over the age of seven. Before this, if a marriage broke down, a father could take his children away from their mother and legally deny her the right to ever see them again.

Thankfully, many people realized these laws were wrong, and by the end of the nineteenth century lots of the worst old laws that discriminated against women had gone. Women were gradually gaining more control over their lives.

Yet still they were not equal citizens with men. They were not allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. Some men thought this was the way things should stay. Most surprisingly, some women thought so too.

But by the time the Victorian era ended with the death of the Queen in 1901, one group of people had been for many years asking the question: why can't women vote? Recognizing that nothing would change fundamentally for women until they could take part in elections, they began to demand that the government give them the vote. These people were called 'suffragists'.

What is Suffrage?

'SUFFRAGIST' IS THE NAME GIVEN TO SOMEONE WHO CAMPAIGNS FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE, EITHER FOR THEMSELVES OR FOR OTHERS.

If you yourself have the right to vote, you can still be called a suffragist if you believe that other people who don't have it should have a vote too.

'Suffragist' comes from the word 'suffrage', which means the right to vote in political elections. The right to vote is sometimes also called the 'franchise'.

Using your franchise, or voting, is important because it is a way of expressing your choice or point of view when a decision is being made on which a group of people have different opinions. A democracy is a system of government in which everyone should have an equal right to express their point of view.

The United Kingdom today is a democracy. At least every five years, there is a parliamentary election called a general election. Everyone over the age of eighteen is asked to vote for a Member of Parliament (MP). Everyone is free to vote for an MP who they think will best represent their point of view in Parliament on the big decisions about how we live our lives. Some people believe that the voting age should be reduced, but there is no longer any distinction between men and women or rich and poor.

Things were not always done this way. Throughout history (and still today in some places), people have had to fight and struggle to be given the right to vote on equal terms with others.

For a very long time in the United Kingdom, women were not allowed to vote in parliamentary elections and so women had no say in how the country was governed. They had no way of expressing a political view or of influencing the laws under which they lived. They were denied suffrage.

It was indeed a man's world… but not for all men equally. It wasn't a simple case that all men could vote and no women could. For many years, millions of men were also denied the right to vote. It took a long time, many riots, violence and petitions to the government before things started to change.

To better understand the story, we need to travel back in time to the Middle Ages.

Centuries ago, the country was ruled by the king, and he alone made decisions for the people. But the king needed the support of the noblemen and landowners who paid him taxes, and over time these men decided that they should have a say in how the country was run.

This eventually led to the creation of a permanent parliament in which the noblemen voted and made the laws.

Most people living in Britain were not noblemen; they were ordinary working people. And they had no vote.

So all the decisions about how most people lived their lives were being made by a very small, privileged group. This was not full democracy.

As time passed, many of the 'ordinary' people, fed up with such injustice, demanded their right to a vote as well.

A huge change happened in 1832, when a decision was made in Parliament to allow some more men to vote. This was called the Great People's Reform Act, but although it was a step in the right direction, it only allowed more wealthy men to vote and still excluded millions of other men – and all women.

By 1867, more and more people were demanding suffrage. A decision was made to give men who owned their own homes the right to vote. This was the Second People's Reform Act, but it still excluded many working men – and all women.

By 1884, the fight for universal suffrage was growing even stronger. The government passed the Third People's Reform Act, giving many more men the right to a parliamentary vote, but it still excluded millions of working-class men – and all women.

Some MPs tried to persuade the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, to give women the vote. But although he was not entirely against the idea, he believed there was not enough support in Parliament, and that the law would not be passed at all if women were included.

Gladstone was probably right. Queen Victoria herself wrote to him, cautioning against this 'mad folly of women's rights', a view still commonly held at the time.

But the suffragists were not about to give up, and the campaign for votes for women was getting steadily more powerful.

1832: The Vote Lost

BUT WAIT! HAD SOME WOMEN BEEN ALLOWED TO VOTE, MANY YEARS AGO?

Some suffragists believed they had, and that in their campaign for votes for women they were fighting not for something new, but for something that had been taken from them.

It was known that long ago in Anglo-Saxon England, an abbess (the woman in charge of an abbey) had been involved in law-making. St Hild of Whitby was a very powerful abbess. She founded an abbey that was home to both nuns and monks. Historical documents showed that St Hild had been engaged in the politics of her time, involved in discussions with the king in the year 664 about when Easter should be set in the calendar year.

Some suffragists also believed that later, in Tudor times (the 1500s), women in England who owned land had voted in parliamentary elections.

If that is true, then it means the right to vote was taken away from women by the introduction of the Great People's Reform Act.

Politicians writing down this new law in 1832 used the words 'male persons' to indicate who was now allowed to vote. Previously the word used was 'mankind', a word often used in laws and understood to describe both men and women.

In 1867 a clerical error did add one woman's name to the electoral register: Lily Maxwell, a Manchester shopkeeper.

When it came to the attention of the local suffrage groups that Lily had been accidentally registered to vote, they made sure she did just that, and on 26 November 1867 Lily Maxwell became the first woman to vote in a parliamentary election since the law had changed in 1832.

Her pioneering action prompted over 5,000 women who owned property in and around the Manchester area to try and register their names on the electoral roll in 1868. All of them were rejected.

But the fight for women's suffrage was beginning in earnest. A fight that was to last another sixty years before women would be able to vote on equal terms with men.

1832–1897: The Acorn Becomes a Mighty Oak

WOMEN HAVE BEEN STRIVING FOR EQUAL RIGHTS WITH MEN FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, BUT BY 1832 STILL VERY FEW PEOPLE, MEN OR WOMEN, WERE IN FAVOUR OF GIVING WOMEN THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.

But one person who did think it important decided to write a petition to Parliament. Her name was Mary Smith and she lived in Yorkshire.

A petition is like a letter to the government asking them to do something. Mary pointed out that as a woman she had to live by the exact same laws as men and pay taxes just as men did, so why should she not be able to vote, just as men did? Without a vote, she had no influence over either laws or taxes, which was completely unfair. Most MPs thought this was just a bit of a joke, and in 1832 no one took Mary seriously at all.

In 1866, a group of women called the Kensington Society, who also thought it very unfair that women had no vote, decided to write their own petition. They included Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett. They had friends who were MPs: John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett, both of whom supported votes for women. John agreed to take the petition to Parliament.

If you want to get your petition noticed, you need people to sign it – lots of people. The Kensington Society's petition had 1,499 signatures of women, rich and poor, from all across the UK. Teachers, dressmakers, shopkeepers, scientists, mathematicians, servants, as well as lots of very posh ladies, all signed it. But the government took no notice.

Imagine how frustrated those women must have felt when only a year later the law changed to give 938,427 more men the vote – but still no women.

In 1867, the Kensington Society became the London Society for Women's Suffrage. This was the beginning of a properly organized women's suffrage movement. Soon more and more societies appeared up and down the country.

This did not amuse Queen Victoria, who in 1870 declared, 'Let women be what God intended, a Helpmate for Man.' But this only made the suffragists even more determined to win.

In 1897, seventeen suffrage societies joined up to make one big group called the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Their first president was a very wise and powerful woman called Millicent Garrett Fawcett.

Millicent Garrett Fawcett

MILLICENT FAWCETT WAS BORN IN 1847. BACK THEN HER NAME WAS MILLICENT GARRETT, AND SHE WAS ONE OF TEN CHILDREN.

As a girl, Millicent enjoyed reading books and learning, and was sent to boarding school in London. As she grew up, she became very interested in the education of girls and women, and how unequally they were treated compared to boys and men. For example, her older sister, Elizabeth Garrett (later Garrett Anderson), had found it difficult to find a college where she could study to become a doctor, just because she was a woman. (But Elizabeth didn't give up, and went on to become Britain's first female doctor.)

Another of her sisters, Louise, introduced Millicent to lots of interesting people who had forward-thinking views on women's rights. In 1865 they went to hear a speech given by the MP John Stuart Mill. Millicent was captivated by his progressive ideas and belief that women should have equal rights with men. This was a shocking view to hold at the time.

In 1867 Millicent married the MP Henry Fawcett, himself an avid supporter of women's rights. Henry was blind, and Millicent would act as his eyes by writing out speeches and debates that took place in Parliament.

She spent many hours sitting in the Ladies' Gallery, the part of the House of Commons where women were allowed to go to watch the proceedings. She didn't much like the Ladies' Gallery. It was hot and stuffy and gave her a headache. But by now Millicent had a keen interest in politics herself, and wrote books and essays on the subject.

She became an outstanding person in the campaign to win votes for women, and although she didn't much like public speaking (in fact it made her feel sick), she gave many speeches, not only about votes for women, but also on education and the rights of working women. Millicent knew that if women gained the vote, it would be a stepping-stone towards changing many of the terrible ways they were being treated in the home and the workplace.

As the leader of the NUWSS, the biggest of all the women's suffrage societies, she insisted that its members campaigned peacefully, within the law, but relentlessly. She always maintained this was the only way to achieve public and government support to win the vote.

When women finally won full equal voting rights with men, Millicent had been peacefully campaigning for sixty-one years.