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Women's history

Suffragette - a film to see

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Sunday 13 March 2016

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What is important and positive about this film is that it shows that the British movement for women's right to vote was a mass movement involving working-class women; it shows the level of repression the state used, learning from how it had treated Irish republicans and testing out methods it would later use against them; and it poses the debate on “direct action” through the attitudes of the women involved.

What it very clearly underlines is why women wanted the vote: to change the appalling conditions of their lives where married women had no rights against their husbands; and unmarried women very few anyway.

It is a brief snapshot of a short period in the history of the movement. As it focuses on women who chose to participate in direct action and chooses to end with the climax of Emily Wilding-Davison's funeral, this could be seen as an approval of the direct action strategy whereas this was a point of discussion and division within the broad movement; the movement was not only the WSPU led by the Pankhursts as it is so often portrayed. The emphasis on mass mobilisation rather than lobbying was something that had first led the Pankhursts in a positive direction, but as it became direct and individualist action it caused splits.

There is much the film does not cover: joint organising with trade unions – an aspect particularly well-documented in relation to textile factories in the North West of England or the debate on votes for all women and men, or on the same (property qualification) basis as men. The attitude to the war when it broke out of course came later, the film is set in 1913.

At this time only about 60 per cent of men had the right to vote because of property qualifications, it was the 1918 Act that gave all men over 21 the right to vote, at the same time as only giving it to women over 30 with a property qualification. Women in the United Kingdom were given the vote on equal terms with men in 1928. Women in the Republic of Ireland (still part of the UK at the time the film is set) got the vote in 1922, when it became independent. Women in some British colonies (New Zealand, Australia) already had the vote.

The film does not show the diversity of the East End population, I didn't notice any Irish accents (mass immigration of Irish into Britain had happened from 1845 because of the Famine) or East European Jews (resulting from the pogroms of the 1880s onwards in the Russian Pale). We might have expected to see these represented among the laundry workers, and of course as an area around the docks there would have been some women from other parts of the world (Asia, Africa) although mass immigration from the West Indies which brought a significant black population to London started after the Second World War. It is usually signified by the arrival of MV Windrush from the West Indies in 1948 with workers recruited for the public services (notably London Transport and the NHS).

Some criticisms of the film have discussed whether more diversity than would be historically accurate should have been introduced. Maybe. However, as far as has been documented up to now, an Indian princess living in Kensington Palace organising a small group of Indian women to participate is the only evidence of (the very small) non-European population's involvement in the movement. To have brought her into the film would have been artificial.

The emphasis of the film is to show the working-class composition of the movement. It also avoids focusing on the Pankhurst family (mother Emmeline and daughters Christabel and Sylvia). There is a scene in which Emmeline Pankhurst is shown as the charismatic leader, this is historically accurate. Sylvia Pankhurst, on the other hand, organised among East End women and broke clearly with her mother and sister both on the question of the

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movement's tactics and strategy, and above all when they moved to the pro-imperialist right and supported the First World War. We should have seen her in the film.

There is a statue to Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst just outside the Houses of Parliament in London. It was erected to commemorate the movement that forced the government to give women the vote. For those of us that grew up in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century at least this is well-known. [1] Of course Sylvia, the socialist, anti-war member of the family is not commemorated although there is now a campaign for a stature to be erected to her in working-class East London. [2]

The 1970s women's movement, which did a lot of work on women's history, wrote about the specifically working-class and trade-union component, notably in north-west England, the region the Pankhursts came from (they were a Manchester family) and where Eva Gore-Booth (the sister of Constance Markiewicz, herself a supporter of women's rights as were many of the other women active in the Irish Easter Rising) was actively involved in organising women workers in the suffrage movement. [3] The BBC also made a TV series in the 1970s (*Shoulder to Shoulder*, unfortunately lost to posterity) which captured more of the feeling of the solidarity and enthusiasm of the movement than this film did, given its choice to focus on the grim lives of unorganised working women in London's East End.

But that is an important point, the women who fought for the vote were not (À la the silly mother in *Mary Poppins*) idle middle-class women with nothing better to do. They were working-class women who suffered more or less bitterly from their lack of rights, and women of the middle classes who also suffered from losing their children in case of separation, the lack of property rights if married, the lack of access to education and professional training. Women fought for the vote to have a weapon to change that situation.

28 November 2015

[1] Too well-known for some! *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 2015, "[Why has everyone forgotten about male suffrage?](#)".

[2] *The Observer*, 6 March 2016 "[Sylvia Pankhurst: shunned, snubbed, now to be honoured at last](#)".

[3] See *One Hand Tied Behind Us – The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris London, Virago 1978, and other works by these authors notably.