

Votes for women

a deliberate tactic, either conscious or culturally embedded, to make you look stupid and your ideas ridiculous.

Another question asked about the experience of women in other political parties, in the immediate aftermath of 1918. Krista explained how the Conservative Party did exactly the same thing constitutionally as the Liberal Party, allowing women to become full and equal members of the party, but keeping their separate organisation. However, the Conservative Party's organisation was much smaller than the Women's Liberal Federation. The Primrose League was on its way out by 1918, looking and feeling very Victorian, but the Women's Tariff Reform Association and the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association meant that the Conservatives had large groups of women who were already organised, and they appointed a women's organiser (with a desk at central office) round about 1920. The position in the Labour Party was different, because until reforms during the First World War, membership of the party had been through affiliate organisations and it had not been possible to join the Labour Party as an individual member. Larger, male unions therefore tended to be represented rather than women, although there were associated groups such as the Women's Co-op Guild and the Railway Women's Guild. Once individual membership was allowed, greater numbers of women joined, but even then their activism within the party was limited by union involvement and the block vote. Despite that, the Labour Party had appointed a women's organiser by 1918. So the Liberal Party was slower to appoint an organiser than the other parties, but had potentially the largest group at the end of the war.

In summing up, Krista commented that although the world was very different a century ago, with many changes over the course of the intervening decades, we are still fighting some of the same challenges today. In the 1920s, Margaret Wintringham's main interests in the House of Commons were equal pay, equal suffrage, and the broader participation of women in public life – and with the exception of equal suffrage, we are still talking about those topics now. Krista pointed out that before 1919 women

could not become lawyers, architects, magistrates or jurors, and it was not until the '70s that women got equal pay. Jo highlighted the slow progress towards eliminating other inequalities: rape within marriage was recognised only in 1991, and even today it takes Wera Hobhouse's current bill in order to make upskirting an offence. Jo agreed that Margaret Wintringham's primary issues were still current. On the topic of equal pay, Jo was previously responsible for securing the government agreement to bring in gender pay gap reporting, and she sees votes at 16 as today's ongoing battle for equal suffrage (although not specific to

women). Representation continues to be an issue, with only a third of Liberal Democrat MPs being women (approximately the average in the House of Commons), and only the Conservative Party ever having elected a woman leader. 'It's absolutely spot on that a History Group meeting considers history, but also follows that through to what the lessons are for today.'

Astrid Stevens works in the software industry, but has also been a technical author and freelance writer. Her leisure interest in history has been pursued through studies with the Open University and Dundee University.

Reviews

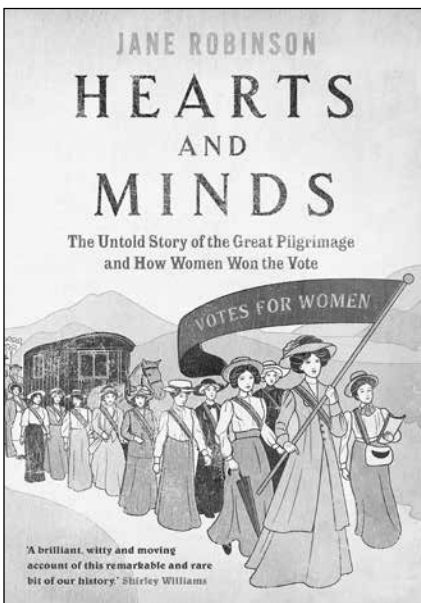
Diane Atkinson, *Rise Up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Jane Robinson, *Hearts and Minds: The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote* (Doubleday, 2018)

Review by **Krista Cowman**

FEBRUARY 2018 MARKED 100 years since the Representation of the People Act finally gave parliamentary votes to some British women. The centenary has been marked in numerous ways – television and radio programmes, statues, local and national exhibitions, a multi-site participatory artwork – 'Processions' – in the UK's four political capitals and a relisting of several listed buildings to emphasise their suffrage connections. Unsurprisingly there has also been a publishing boom bringing new interpretations of the suffrage campaign.

These two books, published as part of the centenary events, present different facets of Edwardian women's struggle for the vote. Diane Atkinson's *Rise up Women!* is a formidable work, cramming a wealth of detail over almost 700 pages. Atkinson's sympathies lie unapologetically with the flamboyant suffragettes whose eclectic militancy spanned the decade before the First World War. A suffrage historian of thirty years experience, Atkinson was excellently placed to write

this book, which goes beyond a formal organisational history of the largest militant society, the Women's Social and Political Union. Her approach is more of a collective biography, making full use of the wealth of recently digitised material also released to mark the centenary. The impact of these sources on the field cannot be underestimated. When Atkinson began suffrage research in the 1990s, revealing the names of the elusive tier of activists below the national leadership was a painfully lengthy process. The local reports columns of the WSPU's weekly journals *Votes for Women* and *The Suffragette* had to be scanned on microfilm or crumbling hard copy, and extracted names cross-checked in the local press. Searching the non-digitised census required an address (often not available) and the 100-year closure rule was outside the timeline of the militant campaign. The digitisation of local and suffrage newspapers, of birth, death, marriage and divorce records and of the census has transformed grass-roots suffrage research, bringing many more



snippets of information out of the shadows.

Rise Up Women! shows exactly what can be done when these snippets are combined into a coherent narrative. One result is a much more eclectic view of the class composition of the militant suffrage campaign. Despite almost three decades of a revisionist suffrage history that challenged interpretations of militancy as the plaything of wealthy women, the myth that working-class women eschewed the WSPU has proved remarkably tenacious. Atkinson's book shows in rich detail how many ordinary women risked imprisonment and social ostracism. We meet Jane Short (alias Rachel Peace) who served prison terms for window-smashing and arson and was a working-class embroiderer. Short was one of the WSPU's last

prisoners, and her presence in Holloway at the end of the militant campaign reminds us that it continued to attract women from across all classes even in its most extreme phase. Atkinson is attuned to the diversity of militancy, covering all aspects from interrupting meetings to mass window-smashing and from coordinated disruption of church services to hunger strikes. Using different voices allows for wide exploration of the actions classed as militant, and their impact on those who carried them out, even when little more is known of their lives.

Jane Robinson's *Hearts and Minds* takes a different focus, although she retains an interest in lesser-known characters. The book centres on a single event, the 'Great Pilgrimage' organised by the constitutional National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1913. Groups of women walked from across the country on a march culminating in a rally of 50,000 in Hyde Park. Serious suffrage scholars would take issue with Robinson's claim that this is an entirely 'untold story.' Some of the ground has been covered in Sandra Stanley Holton's 1987 work *Feminism and Democracy*, and Jo Vellacott's 1993 biography of NUWSS worker Catherine Marshall gives it a whole chapter. That nobody has yet done a book-length study of the pilgrimage is probably because as a single event it may be deemed too slight for such treatment. Nonetheless Robinson has made excellent use of unfamiliar testimonies of the marchers, dispersed across record offices in Britain and the USA and now brought together to present a detailed picture of the two-month walk.

Robinson captures the hostility faced by the marchers for their public stance. Women are mistaken for suffragettes, pelted with eggs by opponents of the militant campaign, and refused food in wayside inns. Marchers in Oxford are put in serious jeopardy by a gang of local youths intent on burning down their caravan. We learn how the camaraderie of being on the road and their enthusiasm for a shared cause keeps them going in this hostile atmosphere. Unfortunately, the book overall does not retain this close focus. Despite stating that women were 'more likely to have been a 'gist' than a 'gette' (p. xv), there is much

here on the WSPU, perhaps because of the difficulty of stretching the narrative over the pilgrimage alone. This shift in focus brings in numerous small errors that detract from the book's authority. Some of these may only be noticed by the most keen-eyed suffrage geek. Wolverhampton suffragette Emma Sproson would not have received 'the usual award' (p. 61) of Sylvia Pankhurst's portcullis brooch on her release from prison in 1907, as this was not designed until some years later. Others are more obvious. *Votes for Women* was not 'renamed *The Suffragette*' (p. 98), but remained with the Pethick Lawrences on their expulsion from the WSPU in 1912. The suffragette colours unveiled by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence for Women's Sunday in 1908 were consistently referenced as purple, white and green, featuring in a suffragette song of this name – not violet, white and green as a 'convenient acronym for give women the vote' (p. 70), something that was imposed retrospectively. In other areas the narrative does not expand to cover what could have been included. The large number of suffrage organisations is acknowledged but a list omits any of the occupational or religious groups and while these are occasionally referenced later in the text, their scope and spread remains unclear.

The book attempts a less formal academic style, but its footnoting is not comprehensive, and there are some surprising omissions. The section on obscure but influential early campaigner Jessie Craigen owes much to Sandra Holton's *Suffrage Days*, which does not figure in either the footnotes or the select bibliography. Neither do works on the immediate post-war period by Pat Thane or Cheryl Law, although their conclusions are reflected in Robinson's text. This makes it less useful as a scholarly work, but it remains a compelling read. Together the books suggest that a century later we still have much to learn about the lives and actions of those who helped achieve votes for women.

Krista Cowman is Professor of History, University of Lincoln. Her publications include Women in British politics, c.1689–1979: Gender and history (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).