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Reviews

Christabel and the Liberals

June Purvis, *Christabel Pankhurst: A Biography* (Routledge, 2018)

Review by **Jaime Reynolds**

ANY STUDENT of the struggle for women's suffrage soon encounters the wide gulf between the popular and academic visions of how the vote was won. In the popular imagination, the militant struggle of the suffragettes led by the Pankhursts dominates the scene. When, in 2018, women MPs celebrated the centenary of the winning of the vote in the House of Commons almost all of them wore the purple, white and green colours of the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). This mirrored the fixation with the suffragette fight in the commemorations that took place that year.

Academic opinion, on the other hand, is less impressed by the suffragette legend and is critical of many aspects of the militant campaign, especially in its later stages. It

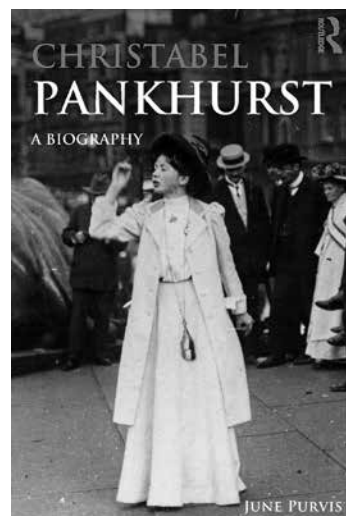
questions the effectiveness of its tactics and attributes the eventual winning of the vote in 1916–18 to factors on which the Pankhurst movement – by then largely disbanded – had little if any impact.

Many observers extend criticism of the strategy of the Pankhursts to their wider ideas and personalities. Thus Martin Pugh, biographer of the Pankhursts, sums up the careers of Christabel and her mother as being characterised by political 'shallowness' and 'their ceaseless search for self-promotion'. The force of this critique lies in the fact that it echoes attacks made on Christabel by many of her erstwhile collaborators in the militant movement, not least Sylvia and Adela Pankhurst, her two younger sisters. Sylvia's *The Suffragette Movement* (1931) which depicts Christabel as its 'evil genius'

had a huge influence over the historiography.

June Purvis sets out to provide a radical feminist corrective to this consensus. Noting that Christabel 'has not been popular with feminist writers and male historians', she presents the case for the defence. Purvis, who is an emeritus professor of women's and gender history at the University of Portsmouth, as one of the foremost students of the suffrage movement is highly qualified to attempt this task. The biography follows her earlier study of Emmeline Pankhurst (2002).

The charge-sheet against Christabel is a long one. First, as chief strategist of the movement – while her ever-supportive mother was its chief agitator, public speaker and martyr – Christabel is blamed for leading the WSPU into a dead-end of escalating militancy and illegality bordering, by 1912–14, on terrorism.



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Intended to shift public opinion and later to coerce the Asquith government into concessions, instead it fuelled and hardened opposition.

Secondly, Christabel's steady shift to the right is deplored. Her insistence on prioritising a limited franchise that would exclude most working-class women repelled many of the left and liberal elements of the WSPU, not least her own sisters. The rightward shift culminated in 1914–18 when the Pankhursts effectively substituted the fight for the vote with a jingoistic pro-war and anti-Red campaign supported and funded by right-wing business and the Rothermere press.

Thirdly, Christabel disappointed many feminists. The pre-1914 Christabel, an inspirational figure and electrifying speaker who developed a radical, separatist feminist standpoint, drifted away from the cause afterwards. After narrowly failing to become the first woman MP to sit in parliament in 1918, she became disillusioned with the results of women gaining the vote, played almost no part in the continuing feminist movement, and was uninspired by or even hostile to its concerns. Many of her friends and critics were perplexed by her new passion – which lasted for the remaining three decades of her life – as a Second Adventist writer and preacher, based mostly in the United States. They saw this

as a strange and regrettable coda to the career of such a brilliant feminist icon.

Lastly, Christabel's personality has come in for much criticism. She is accused of running the WSPU autocratically as a cult, of evading the imprisonment and force-feeding suffered by her mother and followers by operating in comfort from France, and of advocating a 'sex-war' against men. For her first biographer, David Mitchell, she was 'a manipulative ... ruthless, cold, ambitious, autocratic, self-seeking, single-minded, calculating and selfish lesbian'.

Purvis directs heavy fire against the excesses and undeclared biases she detects in much of this criticism, notably the 'masculinist' perspective which, she argues, pervades the writing of many male historians. Such critics fail to understand that Christabel was a radical feminist for whom contesting gender inequality was paramount, not secondary to or inseparable from class, party or wider political considerations. They rely on liberal or socialist feminist sources – above all Sylvia's condemnation – to make their case. For Purvis, this standpoint fails to comprehend Christabel as a radical feminist whose starting point was a refusal to submit to male-dominated parties, laws and ideas.

As regards the shift to the right, Purvis points out that 'feminism is not owned by

the left', and it was not unusual for feminists of the time to hold socially conservative, patriotic and imperialist views as Christabel did. Purvis considers that Christabel's pro-war stance was not an anomaly but in tune with the climate of opinion in wartime Britain. Far from being a betrayal of feminism, Purvis sees Christabel's patriotic crusade as an extension of her feminism and a successful one.

As regards the criticism of her later career as a Christian evangelist, Purvis detects a 'secularist bias' uncomprehending of Christabel's achievement as a woman in becoming a leading international evangelical preacher.

On the central issue of the efficacy of the militant campaign, Purvis defends the strategy developed by Christabel, praising her political insight and tactical skill and suggesting that it was unlikely that non-militancy would have produced any better results. However, she does not hide the extent of the impasse in which the WSPU found itself by 1914, quoting the judgment of Annie Kenney, Christabel's right-hand, that the adoption of violence from 1912 was the point where the movement lost. Purvis implies that the wartime patriotic propaganda of the Pankhurst duo, which opened doors to Lloyd George and influential right-wing circles, helped to defuse hostility towards

votes for women. But if so, this rather confirms the shortcomings of militancy and the potential of a more subtle approach. Purvis also quotes the theory that the threat of a postwar renewal of militancy forced the concession of the vote, but the central fact is that the Pankhursts were absent from the endgame of the suffrage struggle. At the crucial stage, they were pre-occupied with their patriotic mission: Emmeline was in Petrograd attempting to keep the Russians in the war, while Christabel was busy combatting war weariness at home.

Even if she cannot dispel the doubts around the practical results of militancy, Purvis insists that Christabel was 'one of the key feminist thinkers of the twentieth century' and argues persuasively that her career should be examined against the prevailing cultural templates of the time rather than today's assumptions of how a feminist should think and operate. Purvis also has some success in softening the hard image of Christabel's personality. She shows, for instance, that, after Sylvia's expulsion from the WSPU in 1913, the two sisters ceased nearly all contact, but it was Christabel who initiated their reconciliation in old age.

The book contains much of interest on the wider political context, including Christabel's difficult relationship with Liberalism. This was partly ideological: she was sure

that men would never give up power voluntarily unless forced to do so. It was partly tactical: the Liberals were in government and they were thus the primary target of the WSPU's by-election campaigns, harassment, disruption and violence. Christabel also developed a deep personal antipathy for the Liberal leaders, above all Asquith.

This erupted at the November 1912 deputation of the women's suffrage societies, including the WSPU, to 10 Downing Street to protest at the government's abandonment of efforts to achieve a compromise solution to the suffrage issue. Purvis records the exchanges between Asquith and Christabel. Asquith commented that:

Miss Pankhurst talked in terms of peace, presenting, I must say, a pistol in one hand and a dagger in the other'. In regard to Christabel's demand for equal suffrage, he replied 'I am the head of the Government, and I am not going to make myself responsible for the introduction of a measure which I do not conscientiously believe to be demanded in the interests of the country.' The pert Christabel, with a wave of her hand, instantly replied, 'Then you can go, and we will get another head', to which Asquith

retorted, 'I may go if you like. If you can get rid of me'. The exchange did not stop there. 'We are not satisfied', said the spirited Christabel, to which Asquith replied very blandly, 'Oh, I didn't expect to satisfy you.' ... the loyal Annie [Kenney] suddenly confronted Asquith with the announcement, 'I'm a Militant, and we all hate and distrust you. Do you call yourself a statesman?' The startled Asquith refused to discuss the question. Seeing Annie at daggers drawn with the Prime Minister, the protective Christabel interjected, 'Don't fret yourself about him, he is not worth it. Our fight will be on public ground (pp. 257–8).

Lloyd George – dubbed by the suffragettes as 'Oily George' – was included in this loathing. According to a journalist who knew her well, Christabel 'envisaged the whole suffrage movement ... as a gigantic duel between herself & Lloyd George, whom she desired to destroy'. However, this changed. In 1915, encouraged by King George V, Lloyd George sought to enlist the Pankhursts in the war effort. A cordial meeting was held at the Ministry of Munitions and afterwards, when a woman in the crowd outside shouted 'We want the vote',

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Lloyd George replied, 'Yes, but we want you in the shell factory first.' Soon Christabel replaced her mouthpiece *The Suffragette* with *Britannia* (slogan 'For King, for Country, for Freedom'), which specialised in virulent attacks on Asquith, Grey and Haldane for their alleged incompetence and peace sympathies. Effectively Lloyd George had enticed the Pankhursts into his camp for little in return. Christabel's pay-off came at the 1918 general election when, standing for her Women's Party in Smethwick, she was the only woman candidate to receive his Coalition coupon.

Christabel's rancour towards the Liberal Party resurfaced in 1957 when Roger Fulford, a prominent Liberal, published his book *Votes for Women*. She was appalled when Lady Violet Bonham-Carter's favourable comments on the book were broadcast on the BBC: 'I have never heard in the whole of our history such a vindictive diatribe against us, for the way in which we treated her father' [i.e., Asquith]. As for Fulford 'he is just a party-political Liberal – 3 times a Liberal candidate – who knows what the WSPU did to the last Liberal Govt – last in two senses of the word'. She was so agitated by the book that a close friend feared she might have a stroke.

The WSPU's antipathy for the Liberals was fully

reciprocated. Many women Liberal suffragists – part of wider and much larger 'law-abiding' suffragist movement – were exasperated and highly critical of suffragette tactics, which they believed inflamed opposition and delayed attainment of the vote. There is thus some historical irony in the then Lib-Dem deputy-leader, Jo

Swinson's WSPU sash worn in the 2018 Commons celebrations. The truth is that, for much of its existence, the WSPU and the Liberal Party were sworn enemies.

Dr Jaime Reynolds is a retired UK and EU civil servant and independent researcher. He is currently researching the first women leaders in British local politics.

Local Liberal history

Martin Kyrle, *The Liberals in Hampshire – a Part(l)y History. Part 5, Eastleigh 1981–90: Control!* (Sarsen Press, 2022)

Review by **Mark Egan**

IN 1994, I started researching the grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party between 1945 and 1964, for a doctorate that I eventually received in 2000. The conventional wisdom in political science at the time was that political activity at local level was largely irrelevant, elections being decided by big national trends. Some literature was beginning to emerge that looked at the composition of the three main political parties, and there were some academic studies, mostly in the US, which showed a link between local campaigning and election results, but I felt that I was ploughing a lonely furrow, especially in focusing on the Liberals. One of my

immediate challenges was that there were very few books about the Liberals during my chosen period. Also, in those far-off, pre-internet days, finding out basic information such as who the party's candidates were in general elections, and what the outcomes of local elections had been, was a major task. Thanks to Tony Greaves's bookshop, I bought all of *The Times's* House of Commons guides for the period (except for 1945, which was and remains too expensive) which got me started with candidates. I also spent hours churning through old copies of the *Municipal Journal* and *The Times* to work out what was happening in local government.