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Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain During the First World War

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Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote offers fresh and insightful answers to questions about the British women's movement during the Great War that Jo Vellacott was instrumental in reopening exactly thirty years ago. It was in 1977 that she began what has arguably become her life's work: the recovery of those she called the 'anti-war suffragists'.⁽¹⁾ These were a group of leading lights in the largest non-militant women's suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), who resigned from the executive in 1915 in protest at its refusal both to launch a campaign to educate public opinion on questions of war and peace and to send delegates to the International Women's Peace Congress organised in The Hague. For their trouble, they were written out of the official histories of the NUWSS, penned by its president Millicent Fawcett and her ally Ray Strachey.⁽²⁾ In retrieving their voices, Vellacott's careful archival work challenged existing storylines and opened up new areas of enquiry around women's suffrage, feminist responses to the Great War, and the war's long-term impact on British feminism. A reference point for scholars writing about this period, her views have not gone unchallenged over the past three decades. This book continues the conversation in earnest.

Vellacott's principal focus is on women's suffrage. By debunking the tenacious legend that suffragists had unanimously backed the war effort, her earlier work undermined the then dominant narrative whereby British women were enfranchised in return for their dutiful support. The twin questions of why women were enfranchised and why the women's movement did not manage to obtain a better deal for them (enfranchisement was limited to women property holders and wives of householders over 30) have animated historical research ever since. Arguing that women's enfranchisement was not a question of if, but when,

Vellacott is particularly concerned with the second of these questions. One answer, to which she previously subscribed, was that the movement had no choice: in the context of war, no better deal could be achieved. But on closer inspection, she argues here that a better deal was, in fact, possible. The political conditions were favourable: cross-party agreement that reform was necessary, a pro-suffrage House of Commons, the end of militancy, widespread admiration for women's war work, and a government keen to see the Reform Bill passed. Furthermore, Sir John Simon, a Liberal member of the Speaker's Conference, tasked by the government to advise on electoral reform, urged suffragists to take the Speaker's recommendation of an age limit of 30 or 35 for women as a baseline from which to push for more. Vellacott, while clear that this is suggestive, not conclusive evidence, maintains that '[h]ad there been a drive for a wider women's franchise, it is hard to imagine that the Bill would have been abandoned to keep the women out' (p. 164). So why was such a drive nowhere to be seen? The principle reason, she contends, was the Great War's impact on the 'nature of the feminism that prevailed' in the NUWSS (p. 1).

Drawing on her extensive knowledge of the NUWSS's minutes, methods and members, Vellacott identifies two types of suffragists in its midst. Traditional suffragists, animated by a feeling of entitlement to rule over their social inferiors and pride in the empire, tended to support the Conservative Party, and were predominantly present in the south of the country, not least in their principal power base, the London Society for Women's Suffrage (LSWS). By contrast, democratic suffragists treated their social inferiors as equals (or at the very least believed they had a responsibility to them), were critical of the empire, supported the Liberal or Labour Parties, and were predominantly present in the north. Where traditionalists only wanted the vote on the same terms as men, democrats championed adult suffrage. On the eve of war, the latter had been in charge of the NUWSS for four years, after the adoption of a new constitution had loosened the LSWS's grip on the executive and brought in new women from the periphery. Under their leadership the NUWSS grew stronger by establishing links with the Labour Party and working-class women and men. Despite their success, however, by July 1915 they had not only lost power to the traditionalists, but had left the NUWSS altogether. Why and how this happened is the subject of chapters three to eight, while the consequences for the prospects of a broader women's franchise provide the material for chapters 10 to 12.

Taking us to the heart of the NUWSS's internal politics, Vellacott meticulously retraces the unfolding of events between August 1914 and June 1915, as matters increasingly came to a head between the two feminisms. The democratic suffragists, arguing that there was a deep connection between militarism and women's oppression, pushed for the NUWSS to embark on a campaign to educate public opinion on the issue of peace. Traditional suffragists countered both that militarism abroad was more dangerous than militarism at home and that any such campaign would be, in Strachey's words, 'the ruin of suffrage' (quoted p. 86) for it would be perceived as unpatriotic. Their disagreements were resolved through two councils, in February and June 1915 respectively. Vellacott's almost thrilling accounts of the motions and amendments that were mooted, carried and defeated at these councils are to be commended. The ambiguous role of Fawcett, torn between her patriotism and her profound affection and admiration for the democratic suffragists (the patriotism won out); the paranoia of the patriots about the pacifists' intentions; the numerous tactical mistakes of the latter; and the abuse of the NUWSS's democratic procedures by the LSWS in order to guarantee victory, are all vividly portrayed.

In the process, two important secondary themes of this book emerge: that democratic processes are essential but fragile; and that behind their appearance of inevitability, most political victories depend on the accidental, on small things that tip the scales, on interpersonal chemistry, human fallibility and mean-spiritedness. Thus, Vellacott convincingly argues that the patriots' rout of the pacifists was less a reflection of the balance of power across the NUWSS than of the way in which the former used and abused the organisation's internal politics to their advantage (for example, refusing to move the date of the second council despite knowing that a number of leading pacifists could not attend). The pacifists, meanwhile, committed a series of blunders (such as resigning too soon) that weakened their position. What emerges is that the pacifists had a broad following in the NUWSS and that anti-war sentiment went deeper and wider than was previously thought. The sense of loss, of missed opportunity, is well rendered.

Nevertheless, the NUWSS was left in the hands of the patriots, with three dire consequences for the prospect

of a broad women's franchise. First, those most likely to fight for such a franchise were no longer in a position to do so. This is the 'erosion' of the book's subtitle. 'Dispersal' is perhaps a more telling term, for as Vellacott shows, the democratic suffragist vision was not so much undermined as dislodged from its principal power base. As a result it found its energies dispersed among a number of other, less influential organisations. This dispersal had begun before the LSWS takeover as the frustrated pacifists, energised by the Hague Congress, created a new feminist structure: the Women's International League (WIL), to which trades unionists, Quakers, Liberals and well-known writers such as Olive Schreiner rallied. Yet the WIL was only one of many organisations that sprang up to give voice to dissidents in Britain, and the attraction of these organisations caused democratic suffragists to drift imperceptibly away from one another. Furthermore, the WIL had the disadvantage of being new, weak and associated in the public mind only with peace. So when the suffrage issue reappeared on the political agenda, the pacifists worked through a different organisation, the National Council for Adult Suffrage (NCAS). The NCAS was persistently engaged in education work on the question of suffrage, paid attention to those left out of the Speaker's recommendations and listened to Simon. But it had no power base to speak of and was no match for the combined indifference to adult suffrage of the NUWSS and the Labour Party.

Indeed, the second consequence of the NUWSS split was that the best connected and most influential non-militant organisation in Britain was now dominated by a small, sociologically and ideologically homogenous group with no interest in adult suffrage and little regard for democratic process. Here Vellacott decisively undermines the prevalent view that the patriots' victory had kept the NUWSS 'a broad church'. To her, this conclusion is 'rendered indefensible by its failure to take into account class and geographical factors' (p. 95). Indeed, after the June council, the NUWSS was controlled by 'a small group of middle- and upper-class Londoners, ... none of whom could speak for the wide constituency of working women and men touched by the pre-war campaign' (p. 95). This group's lack of interest in a broad franchise was compounded by the top-level advice it was given by most insiders, bar Simon (but including the Prime Minister), that pushing for anything more than the Speaker's recommendations would cause the loss of women's suffrage altogether. Thus, without going to council first or consulting with the constituencies, the executive decided to make a major change to NUWSS policy and accept an age limit for women rather than hold out for the vote on the same terms as men.

The final consequence of the patriots' victory was the quiet severing of the ties built up between organised feminism and organised Labour in the run up to the war. This left the most likely champion of adult suffrage - the Labour Party - free not to push for a better deal for women when the suffrage question reappeared. A first casualty of the new executive was the Election Fighting Fund (EFF), a policy set up in 1912 to bring financial and organisational support to Labour candidates in three-cornered contests following the party's pledge to reject franchise reforms that excluded women. Supported by a strong majority in the NUWSS executive that included Fawcett, it had nonetheless been a controversial policy in those societies with close links to the Liberal Party. It was now all but abandoned by an executive whose 11 new members came 'from or [were] connected with the relatively few societies which had never been comfortable with the EFF policy' (p. 93). Relations with the working class were further undermined by the change in policy regarding women's war work. At the outbreak of war, the democratic suffragist-dominated NUWSS embarked on relief work that sought to alleviate women's suffering caused by war, particularly unemployment. The LSWS, by contrast, sought ways to release more men for the front by putting women in their place. Its priority, Vellacott contends, was less the welfare of women workers than the needs of the war machine. Thus, under its new leadership, the organisation became more confrontational towards the trades unions, tended to reproduce the classist assumptions (i.e., the poor in manual jobs, the rich as overseers) that dominated the attribution of jobs to women, and showed some interest but little commitment to protecting women workers' rights. Let off the hook by this estrangement, the Labour Party gave in to its fear of losing manhood suffrage and to the rising sexism among its male rank and file, embittered by women's wartime encroachment into the workplace. Vellacott points out that there was something rather self-defeating about this position: after all, the women who got the vote were likely to vote Conservative, those who did not would have voted Labour. Calling for more research into this area, she suggests that the long term consequence for the Labour Party was to turn it away from 'the potential of an integrative feminism towards

an exclusionary and even patriarchal emphasis on the class struggle' (p. 178).

There is no doubt that Vellacott's fresh take on how the vote was won enriches our understanding. In proposing her counterfactual reading, however, it is arguable that she makes too much of Simon's advice - he appears to have been a rather lonely voice among insiders. She may also be too optimistic in thinking that a broad franchise was likely before the guns began blazing in August 1914. Nevertheless, by insisting on the importance of political rapports de force, her book offers an illuminating and, I would argue, a complementary counter-point to the latest studies, which have given more weight to the war's impact on cultural understandings of gender and citizenship in explaining the winning of the vote for women.[\(3\)](#)

In addition to exploring women's enfranchisement, Vellacott compares the different responses to war that came out of the women's suffrage movement and evaluates them as forms of feminism. This too is an area that her rediscovery of the anti-war suffragists had prompted her to explore in a previous, and controversial, article. If some suffragists had opposed the war on feminist grounds, she argued, then this raised awkward questions about the feminist credentials of those who had not. On her reading, what the different responses revealed was a division in the movement between those 'whose suffrage claims still rested mainly on a demand to be admitted to the existing male political system, unchanged' [\(4\)](#) and those who wanted the vote in order radically to change that system. The latter developed a 'sophisticated feminist view of the war' [\(5\)](#) and opposed it; whereas the former, from the militant Emmeline Pankhurst to the constitutionalist Fawcett, did no such thing, falling unselfconsciously into the support roles expected of women in wartime. This relationship between attitudes to suffrage and attitudes to war, she continued, should give pause to contemporary feminists. In particular, it should lead them to dislodge the militants from their privileged position in the history of feminism in favour of those who had consistently rejected violence both in pursuit of the vote and in opposition to the war. Subsequent scholarship has challenged her position and in this book she both defends and clarifies it.

The principal attack on Vellacott's argument was mounted by Susan Kent who described the actions and ideas of the pacifists as grounded in the essentialist (i.e. un- and possibly even anti-feminist) language of motherhood. To her, far from being inspirational foremothers, these women, by accepting the ubiquitous wartime dichotomy of women-as-carers/men-as-killers, had largely contributed to taking the British women's movement down the blind alley of 'difference' in which it remained terminally stuck until the Second World War and to which it must not, on any account, return.[\(6\)](#) Denouncing an 'ahistorical theoretical analysis that makes no sense in the context of the time' (p. 31), Vellacott counters that 'we need to distinguish between vocabulary and action, and to situate the discourse in the context of the time' (p. 48). While I agree with her critique of Kent and her emphasis on contextualisation, I find this proposed action/rhetoric dichotomy problematic. Indeed, action and rhetoric exist not as two independent fields but in a symbiotic relationship. Those feminists launched into relief and pacifist work precisely because of their belief in women's special insights into the world provided by their biological and social roles as mothers. That they did not think motherhood was the only role for women (p. 32) is beside the point: it is the role that matters, the role from which their claim to transform the political arises. In other words, we cannot focus exclusively on what they did and treat what they said as a sign of the times that can be safely ignored. That we might want, as Vellacott justifiably does, to build a case similar to theirs in less essentialist terms is one thing, but we do a disservice to our historical understanding if we pretend that what they said and what they did were not intimately intertwined.

In addition to defending the pacifists' feminism, Vellacott offers a clarification of her thesis. Indeed, although never explicitly accusing the pro-war group of being non- or anti-feminist, her argument could be read as such. Any ambiguity is here lifted: '[i]t was of course not by definition anti-feminist to support the war effort' (p. 32). This formulation advantageously takes the heat out of the discussion of the split in the NUWSS and allows for an illuminating comparison, as we have seen, of the two feminisms' contrasting attitudes to war, Labour and suffrage. That said, I have found her reading of the pro-war suffragist line, at times, to be unduly close to that of the democratic suffragists' and wonder if a more sympathetic (if not less critical) reading could not have been given. Take, for example, Fawcett's bitter disagreement with pacifist Helena Swanwick over the NUWSS's attitude to the war. Swanwick argued that suffragists must oppose the

war because they had always opposed the idea that politics, whether national or international, rested on force. Vellacott describes Fawcett's answer, grounded in 'a virulent attack on German philosophy, policies and practices', as 'irrelevant' (p. 50). I have not read the document in question but I suspect that Fawcett's argument may have been that it was precisely because suffragists were opposed to the use of physical force and in favour of the rule of law that they should oppose Germany, a country whose philosophers claimed that might is right, whose policy had been to violate international law by invading neutral Belgium, and whose war practice was to use force even against civilians. These may be poor arguments, but they were not irrelevant to the question and often recurred in the animated debates between pacifists and patriots that rocked the correspondence pages of the NUWSS's organ, *Common Cause*.⁽⁷⁾ It would be unfortunate if Vellacott's important work of recovery of the pacifists led to an obscuring of our understanding of their opponents' views.

Which brings me to Vellacott's treatment of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's response to the war. Within her clarified framework, their Hun-hating brand of patriotism and staging of military recruitment campaigns continue to fail to make the feminist cut, either in rhetoric or action. Thus, where Jacqueline de Vries suggested that their gendered interpretation of the war, whereby the 'feminine' values and qualities of Britain and her allies were pitted against the 'masculine' ones of Germany, was arguably feminist, Vellacott detects only a 'feminist theoretical flavour', noting that 'the representation of Germany as the male bully and Belgium as the assaulted maiden was also much used by both government and press for pro-war propaganda' (p. 21). This, however, misses the point: the government and press did not use these gendered images to go on to argue that this was a war for women's freedom, or use the deeply gendered language of war to argue for women's right to citizenship. As for their actions, Vellacott stresses their striking similarity with those of the leading anti-suffragist Mrs Humphrey Ward, and argues that they amounted to 'conforming to the role expected of women in wartime' as 'docile supporters of men's wars' (p. 48). Now, they were certainly supporters, but they were far from docile. There are chilling editorials from Christabel Pankhurst calling for the country to spare none of its male blood in this holy war.⁽⁸⁾ Nor did they see it as the men's war. On the contrary, they continuously insisted that this was women's war above all because of the threat that Germany, a nation that privileged men and masculinity over women and femininity, posed to women's freedom. The point with political arguments is not so much what you say, as Vellacott rightly claims when defending the pacifists, but what you are trying to do in saying it.⁽⁹⁾ The pacifists were trying to use the widespread association of mothering with peace to make a case for women's active and immediate involvement in a transnational peace campaign. The Pankhursts were trying to use the widespread association of Germany with the oppression of women to make a case for women's involvement as active political actors in the war effort and the polity.

The cumulative effect of Vellacott's discussion is to frame the Great War as dealing a nasty blow to British feminism's historical evolution. This marks a sharp turn in her thinking. Her earlier work, written in the context of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, unsettled the dominant narrative of pre-war apogee and post-war decline of British feminism by claiming that 1915, the year of the Women's Peace Congress and of the publication of some of the most striking pacifist feminist writings, should now be seen and celebrated as a landmark in the annals of feminism.⁽¹⁰⁾ Writing in the context of a global 'war on terror' which feminists have criticised but not (so far) effectively countered, and no longer focusing exclusively on ideas and their legacy but taking in the history of the organisation as well, her assessment is more sombre. But it is not all despair. For if the Great War 'eroded' the democratic suffragist vision, it did not obliterate it. The book's ultimate message, then, is one of hope. Even in the darkest of hours, feminists have fought, if clumsily, for peace. Even when no one was listening, as during the inter-war period mentioned briefly in the epilogue, they have articulated a powerful alternative vision for the conduct of international relations. Calling on feminists to reclaim that vision in the 21st century, the book ends with one final familiar and important theme of her work: the use of history to re-open urgently needed avenues of political thinking.

Notes

1. J. Vellacott-Newberry, 'Anti-war suffragists', *History*, 62 (1977), 411-25. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. See M. G. Fawcett, *What I Remember* (London, 1924) and R. Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London, 1978). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The most important of these is N. Gullace, '*The Blood of Our Sons': Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War*' (Basingstoke, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Vellacott, 'Feminist consciousness and the First World War', in *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, ed. R. R. Pierson and S. Broadribb (London, 1987), p. 121. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Vellacott, 'Feminist consciousness and the First World War', p. 116. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. S. Kent, *Making Peace: the Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 1993). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See, for instance, the correspondence page of *The Common Cause*, 2 October 1914, p. 460. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See, for instance, C. Pankhurst, 'War service for all', *The Suffragette*, 4 June 1915, p. 118. There is a minor factual error on p. 21 where Vellacott claims that *The Suffragette* reappeared in April 1915 under the new name *Britannia*. It did indeed reappear in April 1915 but adopted its new name only six months later, in October 1915. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. For the sophisticated version of this point, see *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, eds, J. Tully and Q. Skinner, (Cambridge, 1988). [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. *Militarism versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War / Catherine Marshall, C. K. Ogden and Mary Sargent Florence*. M. Kamester and J. Vellacott, eds, (London, 1987), p. 20. [Back to \(10\)](#)

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