
Sylvia Pankhurst Fought to “Make the Future a Place We Want to Visit”

BY

DANA MILLS

British suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst was a militant campaigner for women’s right to vote. As a socialist, she also refused to uncouple the women’s movement from the fight for equality across all of society.

Review of Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel by Rachel Holmes (Bloomsbury, 2020).

Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel is an extraordinary work, a vital and necessary intervention, and an urgent read for our times. Rachel Holmes has written the definitive biography of one of the twentieth century’s political giants. Political rebel, human rights champion, and radical feminist ahead of her time, Pankhurst has for too long been pigeonholed as a “British suffragette.”

Though she did work at the very center of the militant struggle for universal suffrage (and put her own body on the line), her activism spanned beyond that fight, ranging two world wars; fascism, colonialism, and the struggles against them. All of those chapters of Sylvia’s life are given space in this biography, told intimately from the point of view of this unique woman who sought to “make the future a place we want to visit.”

Born in 1882, Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst was the daughter of Britain’s most famous suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. Her barrister father, Richard, known as the “Red Doctor,” had drafted the 1870 Married Women’s Property Act with his friend John Stuart Mill. Along with Sylvia’s two sisters and one brother, the Pankhursts became “the first family of British feminism,” helping to create a mass movement which, Holmes claims, was on a scale not known since the Chartists.

The famous maxim of Rosa Luxemburg (who would one day become Pankhurst’s comrade) that the choice is always between socialism or barbarism, was keenly felt by Sylvia too. Her father Richard had taken her to listen to Eleanor Marx speak in 1896, a definitive and inspiring experience for the young Sylvia. (This foremother of socialist-feminism was the subject of Holmes’s previous biography.) Sylvia’s education as a teenage activist in the suffragette movement left her with a lifelong attentiveness to how oppression impacts women differently, later writing on the effects of fascism on women, and how imperialism and colonialism bring further violence to native women.

Throughout her younger years, Sylvia was part of “the family party,” the Women’s Political and Social Union (WPSU), founded in 1903 and mobilized from her family’s front room; its motto was “Deeds, not Words.” But divisions in the family soon emerged. Sylvia’s mother and elder sister Christabel argued for a vanguard of educated, middle-class women to be first in line for the vote, only then tending to the concerns and everyday suffering of working-class women.

They argued that the WPSU should focus on the issue of votes for women exclusively, elevating gender above all other organizing categories. Sylvia, by contrast, sustained her father’s socialist ethos in pushing for votes for all women and working-class men, and as a result found herself shunned by her mother and sister for her unstinting insistence on equality and inseparability of all struggles, socialism a red thread of her thinking.

A talented and visionary artist who won two scholarships to the Royal College of Art (at a time when entry for women was rare), Sylvia designed the “Portcullis and Arrow” brooch, which was given to suffragettes who served prison sentences for militant action demanding the vote. She sketched women workers at work, women prisoners, and women on the trail of the suffragette campaign. Inspired by the legacies of the public art of, among others, Walter Crane and William Morris, Sylvia excelled at large-scale public art, including installations and murals. Art and struggle were interleaved for Sylvia, and the struggle for justice led the development of her vocation, as an artist in temperament and calling, Holmes shows.

Sylvia was first imprisoned in 1906 and at the height of the militant campaign, between 1913–14, was in and out of Prison Holloway thirteen times, more than any other suffragette. Militant suffragists were routinely tortured in prison, yet Sylvia was resilient, and her ability to continue organizing despite multiple arrests and releases made her at once more dangerous to the British state and at the same time, more aware of the challenges the suffragette campaign was up against.

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Natural-Born Rebel, Citizen of the World

In 1912, Sylvia moved to the East End of London and in May 1913, alongside Norah Smyth and American suffragette Zelig Emerson, she founded the London East End WPSU, where she worked on the campaign for suffrage alongside agitating for a welfare system. Holmes notes that the postwar Clement Attlee government drew on her work and writing in its creation of the British National Health Service.

When public opinion was divided among the suffragettes on the issue of the First World War, Sylvia took a principled, internationalist stand, once again parting way with her mother and sister Christabel, who both supported the war. Against them, she argued that

this war, like the Boer war and all others we have known, is fought for material gains ... it is a huge and shameful loss to humanity.

It was this participation in antiwar campaigning that brought Sylvia into close contact with some luminary radicals of her time who also opposed the war, among them, Clara Zetkin. Sylvia had entered World War I, Holmes notes, a socialist and reluctant militant reformist and Labour Party supporting suffragist; she emerged from it a left-wing revolutionary communist. Sylvia was a revolutionary in all spheres of her life. Her first great love was Keir Hardie, the first leader of the Labour Party.

As the Bolshevik Revolution erupted in Russia, Sylvia offered her fulsome support. Her newspaper, *Workers' Dreadnought*, welcomed the Russian revolution and supported the immediate dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, earning Lenin's admiration, who praised her for representing "the interests of hundreds of thousands of people." Indeed, in November 1917 she argued that:

the Russian problem is our problem: it is simply whether people understand socialism and whether they desire it. Meanwhile, our eager hopes are for the Bolsheviks of Russia: may they open the door which leads to freedom of all lands.

At the 1918 Labour Party conference in Britain, she argued against intervention in Russia; the Labour Party was making wartime compromises and was hostile in its response to the Bolshevik Revolution. Her 1920 article, "Towards a Communist Party," published in *Workers' Dreadnought*, sparked Lenin's interest about the prospects of a British Communist Party. Her refusal to unite socialist parties and her call for anti-parliamentarism in the course of revolutionary action had spurred his anger. Lenin wrote "Left wing childishness" as a response to his debate with Sylvia, in which he termed her "ultra-leftism" an "infantile disorder."

Sylvia never wavered in her commitment to international socialism. In 1921 she was accused of sedition and spoke in her own defense: "I am going to fight capitalism even if it kills me. It is wrong that people like you should be comfortable and well fed while all around you people are starving."

The 1920s were a revolutionary decade for Sylvia in more than one way; in 1927, at the age of forty-five, she was unmarried when she had her only child Richard with her Italian anarchist partner, Silvio Corro, leading her mother and sister Christabel to cut all ties with her — though by this stage, their relations were already strained due to their pronounced political differences. Among Pankhurst's internationalist commitments, she was an early critic of Italy's aggressions in Ethiopia, and saw the dangers of the rise of fascism before many others had done so.

She wrote, powerfully, in 1933: "fascism denies and destroys all freedom of thought, party, press, association: exploits and enslaves the workers." Educated in the struggle for democracy, Sylvia saw its dismantling before others had noticed those processes. The resistance, as ever, came from the humanity and resilience of those attacked by fascism.

Sylvia studied Ethiopian art and culture, and her dedication to anti-colonial struggles brought her in close conversation with W. E. B. Du Bois, who commended her for bringing black Ethiopia to white England. During the Second World War, she helped Jewish refugees escape from under Nazi hands.

Sylvia's internationalist commitments found expression not only in political organizing, but in her travels as well. Her travels in the United States in 1912–13, when she visited immigrant communities in New York and Chicago, the racially segregated South and a Native American college left a deep impact on her. After the 1917 revolution, an event that impacted the lives of all revolutionaries around the world, including Sylvia, she went, undercover, to Soviet Russia, a journey she also chronicled.

She traveled throughout Continental Europe and studied the progressive welfare provisions there. Her commitment to anti-racism and anti-imperialism brought her to Eastern Africa where she developed an interest and skill in chronicling the cultural history of Ethiopia, to counter the demeaning, racist narratives of her time. Her later life was spent in Ethiopia. She was invited by Haile Selassie, who had become a close interlocutor during his exile in 1935. Sylvia was bestowed upon with the highest state honors in Ethiopia. When Sylvia died at the age of seventy-eight in Ethiopia, she received a state funeral.

Sylvia was fearless at the face of all challenges which life and history presented her. "When you know you're right, you can't be turned aside," she once said, and her political commitments were matched by an unwavering moral clarity. Her sister Adela noted in 1933 that "in Sylvia's eyes, to cease being a socialist, if one had ever been one, is a moral crime."

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It’s the achievement of Holmes’s biography to bring to life Sylvia’s remarkable life, in all its range. Her attention to detail transposes the reader over the course of this biography from Sylvia’s Manchester living room where her family hosted feminist “at home” gatherings to solitary confinement in Prison Holloway, through the Lower East Side where the burgeoning American Labor Movement fought capitalism from within its core, a meeting at the Kremlin with Lenin, to the independent Ethiopia which was a bulwark against defeating fascism as Sylvia enjoyed the shadow of Eucalyptus trees.

All the while we gain, from Holmes’s book, a real, human and humane Sylvia, a woman who hated porridge, was a terrible cook and loved Charlie Chaplin’s films. She was a loving partner and mother, a faithful friend, and comrade to many, committed to leaving the world a better place than the one she had entered.



Sylvia Pankhurst at work on the new East London Federation headquarters of the WSPU in Bow Road, London, October 11, 1912. (Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

She was a humble woman who lived simply, as she stated in a rare reflection she wrote on herself, “personal ambitions were to her both puny and ephemeral, because she realized that, when in a thousand years, all we who strive and labour in our passing days are dust, mankind will still be working its destiny.” All the while, her inimitable ability to measure reality as it is, while sustaining a visionary idea for a just world not yet here, carry from every path taken by Sylvia Pankhurst. This account is contagious to the twenty-first-century reader.

As the world shifts from one lockdown to another in the midst of a global pandemic, it is striking to read of Sylvia’s robust sense of self, her resilience, courage, and capacity for action. This sense of self, Holmes powerfully shows, was sustained by immersing herself in struggle. The shocking poverty, alienation, and hardships against which she ceaselessly fought never infringed upon her quest to create a new world of collaboration, beauty, justice, and peace.

In our current twenty-first-century zeitgeist in which neoliberal and capitalist dictums tell us to “self-care” and to focus on individuals as a path for well-being, it is an urgent lesson to see how a life lived for the shared world can empower and uplift each and every one of us. Holmes quotes from a deeply evocative tribute from one of the Ethiopian men who knew her in her last years: “She worked day and night without rest, used all her energy and brilliant mind to help people. What makes me sad is that there were so many things she wished to complete.”

Rachel Holmes’s *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel* is full of honesty and integrity that shine from every page and reach straight to the reader’s heart. As we busy ourselves in rebuilding the international left, in times of great poverty and strife but also of rising collective action, it is an urgent moment we acknowledge our debt to Sylvia Pankhurst, as we continue her work into a world of justice and equality for all, as she herself once wrote in a visionary essay, “What I Am Aiming at: A Chance for the Children of Tomorrow.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dana Mills is an author, dancer, and activist. Her most recent book is *Rosa Luxemburg* (Reaktion Books, 2020).

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