

The Revolutionary Life of Sylvia Pankhurst

By

Pauline Bryan

A new book explores Sylvia Pankhurst's incredible political journey, from the women's suffrage movement and the fight for socialism at home to the battle against empire in Ireland, Africa and beyond.

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

Rachel Holmes' previous books tell the lives of three remarkable women, Eleanor Marx, Saartjie Baartman and Dr. James Barry. Her new biography of Sylvia Pankhurst is long at over 900 pages, but such a big life deserves a big book, especially when it is written with political understanding and tremendous sympathy for women in politics.

Indeed, there is an early link to one of Rachel Holmes' previous subjects when, aged thirteen, Sylvia was taken by her father to meet Eleanor Marx. Sylvia's life reads like a history of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She seemed, at times, to be involved in every major political event. As the author says, while the Pankhurst name will always be associated with the fight for women's suffrage, for Sylvia "by far the larger part of her life was dedicated to fighting the evils of racism, fascism and imperialism."

The story of Sylvia Pankhurst's life weaves through the birth of the Labour Party, the creation of new trade unions, the struggles in Ireland (including the 1913 general strike and the 1916 uprising), the fight against poverty and degradation in the East End of London, opposition to fascism in Europe and Britain, the founding of the Communist Party and the post-war resistance to British imperialism. During her later years she was dedicated to the rebuilding of Ethiopia, where she worked until the last day of her life. She did all this as well, of course, as being one of the most prominent figures in the women's suffrage movement.

Her parents' home was open to a great cast of protagonists in these struggles, from the Indian nationalist Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Asian MP, HG Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Beatrice and Sydney Webb and, most significantly, Keir Hardie. And, once Sylvia had a home of her own, she similarly made it available to any activist passing through London or wishing to plan the next campaign.

Sylvia Pankhurst's commitment to working class struggle was central to her politics, the foundation passed down from her parents, particularly her father. As Holmes says,

Sylvia supported wholeheartedly the cause of female suffrage... She believed also in the necessary conjoining of the economic and political struggle of women and the working class. Without a class analysis, feminism was a minority campaign group for rich and middle class women who wanted equality with their brothers and husbands, but had no interest in extending the same rights to their chauffeurs or housemaids.

This is the key to understanding Sylvia Pankhurst and what eventually separated her from her mother and older sister. As much as Emmeline and Christabel later wanted to rewrite the history of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), it was initially formed as an affiliate to the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Its manifesto committed the WSPU to securing the female franchise and justice for women within the labour movement.

Over time the rift between the two organisations grew so that Keir Hardie became a target for attack by the leadership of the WSPU. Even Hardie's commitment to women's suffrage, which was not always popular with ILP members, was not enough to prevent it. Despite this and his longstanding link to the Pankhurst family, he was singled out for particular attack on the basis that he was wasting his time on campaigns for other reforms. Emmeline told Hardie that he had got his priorities wrong. "Employment reforms – and all other reforms – would become a matter of course once women had won the vote." If only this was the case.

In another life Sylvia would have spent her time as an artist. She dedicated what little time she could to capturing the beauty of women, often in dreadful working conditions. The biography sent me back to look at her son Richard's book from 1979 *Sylvia Pankhurst: Artist and Crusader*, a wonderful reminder of her graphic designs, drawings and paintings. As a prize-winning student she had the potential for a career in art. But there was little time to paint except when creating posters and placards. Her designs, however, gave the suffrage movement its most memorable images.

Over time, the tensions between Sylvia and her mother and older sister grew. The author describes them as a microcosm of what was happening in the WSPU. As it became more of a guerrilla army than a movement it inevitably became more autocratic. Sylvia did not shy away from militancy but wanted greater openness, she never avoided arrest and at one time she held the unenviable record for the number of times she was force-fed. But her concern was for the participants who received harsh punishment when arrested and for whom, unlike the better known suffragettes, "there would be no international telegrams."

During the celebrations of the suffragettes two years ago, a great deal of history was sanitised. It was often presented as a political difference that was eventually resolved in a sensible manner. The violence mobilised against women was sometimes glossed over. Keir Hardie once remarked that, "the endurance and heroism these women are showing in prison equals, if it does not excel, anything we have witnessed in the field of battle."

But many men in the movement probably could not understand the depth of the deliberate degradation meted out to women. Reading the details of oral or nasal force feeding is excruciating. Sylvia described it as rape. In fact, in some circumstances suffragettes experienced vaginal or anal 'feeding,' which of course had nothing to do with nourishment. It is almost too horrific to contemplate and, not surprisingly, most women would never talk about it.

The treatment of women by police and politicians when they protested was often vicious. Sylvia herself nearly had her arm broken by Winston Churchill. Black Friday in 1910 saw a brutal attack on a WSPU deputation marching to parliament to draw attention to yet another betrayal by the Liberal government. The level of violence was unprecedented and obviously planned. It included organised sexual assault and rape, as well as attempts to humiliate women by ripping their clothes off. It could not but have been sanctioned at the highest level.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many women activists became hostile to all men. Their experience during the struggle and perhaps their experience in their family lives would have reinforced their hatred of the patriarchal system. A close-knit community of women who trusted and supported each other allowed for the development of deep and lasting friendships and emotional attachments. Lesbian relationships blossomed where women were acknowledged as partners.

But there was also a moral puritanism within the movement, particularly encouraged by Christabel Pankhurst. Christabel was reaching out to the “hidebound middle-class moral-purity movement.” Sylvia wrote that there was an assertion that “women were purer, nobler and more courageous, men... an inferior body, greatly in need of purification.” In a pamphlet entitled *The Great Scourge*, Christabel called for “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men.” Some at the time would claim that Sylvia Pankhurst had shown proof of her collaboration with patriarchy by her intimate relationship with Keir Hardie.

There has been decades of speculation about Sylvia and Keir Hardie’s relationship. The author has no doubts about the evidence of a lasting and intimate relationship. It sustained them both through a period of unrelenting pressure in their political lives. In Cumnock in Scotland and Merthyr Tydfil in Wales, Hardie continued to be a family man with a wife and children. At his death in Scotland he was cremated and then buried in Cumnock and, of course, Sylvia could not attend. She learned of his death in the same way her mother had learned of the death of her own husband – by seeing a newspaper billboard. As Rachel Holmes says, “it required grim fortitude to grieve alone.”

What is less well known is that she lived with Silvio Corio for over 35 years. They worked tirelessly together producing journals and pamphlets, organising meetings and offering hospitality to an endless stream of activists from all over the world. Corio’s Italian politics meant that he was quick to identify the threat of Mussolini and his determination to enlarge the fascist empire, starting with Ethiopia. There followed decades of involvement with Ethiopia and an unlikely friendship with Haile Selassie, the country’s emperor.

Selassie was a hereditary monarch but was also a freedom fighter. Nelson Mandela wrote of Ethiopia as “the birthplace of African nationalism” and of Selassie’s influence as the shaping force of contemporary Ethiopian history, explaining how the Ethiopian example inspired and contributed to the formation of the African National Congress. Sylvia had followed her father’s opposition to the monarchy and explained to Selassie that she supported him not because he was emperor but because she believed in the cause of Ethiopia.

There is much more to be said of Sylvia Pankhurst, of course. Her involvement in the debates around the establishment of the Communist Party of Great Britain, her time in the US and her links with James Connolly and Eva Gore Booth and many others in Ireland. Her most poignant comment on Connolly was “to me the death of James Connolly was more grievous than any because his rebellion struck deeper than mere nationalism.” And “Connolly was needed so seriously for the after-building.” As in so many cases, she was proven right.

Her life ended in Ethiopia with her son and daughter-in-law alongside her, working to make the world aware of the country’s efforts to rebuild. It was probably the most comfortable time in her life. She had a light and airy home with a beautiful garden. She was respected by Ethiopians and renewed her friendship with many of the leaders of the newly-independent African countries.

She had already written her own epitaph: “When victory for any cause came, she had little leisure to rejoice, none to rest; she had always some other objective in view.”

Rachel Holmes’ ‘Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel’ is [now available to pre-order from Bloomsbury.](#)

About the Author

Pauline Bryan is a Labour member of the House of Lords. She is a supporter of Campaign for Socialism in Scotland and a founding member of the Keir Hardie Society.