

Sylvia Pankhurst: The Rebellious Suffragette by Shirley Harrison

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★★★★★	
Reviewer: John Van der Kiste	
	
Summary: A biography of the noted suffragette campaigner and pacifist, and her often divided family who had similar aims but often disagreed on how to achieve them.	
Buy? Yes	Borrow? Yes
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To some extent, the history of the suffragettes was also the history of the Pankhurst family. Sylvia, born in 1882, was the second daughter of Dr Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst, and one of three sisters. The family had always been heavily politicised, Richard being a founder member of the Fabian Society alongside George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, and the children had quite an austere upbringing. When their father's health took a sudden turn for the worse in 1898, Emmeline and eldest daughter Christabel were abroad on business and Sylvia was left in charge of her younger siblings as well as having to nurse him, taking the full force of the shock when he died in her arms. With his passing the family were left strangely detached from each other. His widow became heavily involved in public work and political agitation, an increasingly remote mother from the young children who needed her.

In the words of youngest sister Adela many years later, they had no friends, played no games and went nowhere. Sylvia became hopelessly depressed, only finding relief in public life. She found herself very much at cross purposes with Emmeline and Christabel, who believed that direct action and increasingly violent methods to attract attention to the campaign for women's suffrage was the only way ahead. A gentler personality, Sylvia preferred the more peaceful approach. She threw herself wholeheartedly into work in the poorer parts of the East End of London, helping to found a toy factory to provide jobs for the unemployed, while

continuing to argue the case for women's votes in the press. Christabel considered arson an effective weapon, and Sylvia was unimpressed when her sister demanded she go and burn down Nottingham Castle.

Nevertheless she was involved in some direct action as a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, and imprisoned more than once where she was treated appallingly. But she was alarmed by the increasingly violent tactics of some of the campaigners, and drew the line firmly at such action as well-dressed women producing hammers from their handbags with which to smash shop windows throughout central London.

When war was declared in 1914, she disagreed strongly with her mother and elder sister, who supported the national effort. They moved further to the right (Emmeline even joined the Conservative party in later life and became a parliamentary candidate, albeit in a seat in the East End where she would not have stood a chance of being elected) while she became increasingly left-wing, flirting with the Communist movement for a while. The final breach with her mother came when she settled down with the Italian anarchist Silvio Corio and bore him a son, Richard, but refused to marry him as she objected to entering into such a contract and taking the name of a husband. A lifelong pacifist, devout anti-fascist campaigner, high on Hitler's arrest list should he invade England, and supporter of the cause of Ethiopia against Italian colonialism, she later settled there and died in Addis Ababa in 1960. Although full suffrage was achieved in 1928, the year that Emmeline died, her daughters would not be fully reconciled for another twenty-five years.

This biography is in part a history of the Pankhurst family's fight for women's suffrage as well as an account of the rather dysfunctional family and their differences. We are left in no doubt that parents and children were all very dedicated, intense people who put their cause above family life, and in their differences about how to achieve their objective became hopelessly divided. There are some harrowing descriptions of the treatment of women in prison and the horrors of force-feeding, introduced after the 'Cat and Mouse Act' which provided for the release of hunger strikers when dangerously weak but arrested again on trivial charges should they recover sufficiently. Sylvia herself was in a very bad way when she went on hunger and thirst strike during a sentence in 1913, prior to release on condition that she drank two cups of milk each day. She was more fortunate than some, notably Lady Constance Lytton, who became paralysed as a result of force-feeding and remained partly paralysed for life.

It must have been tempting for the author to probe the psychology of the family and the differences which divided them when all of them had basically the same objective. She prefers to avoid that, instead devoting the book to hard fact, both biographical and historical. This is done very effectively, for the campaign of female suffrage took place against the background of a turbulent age with the First World War and the Home Rule crisis also occupying the minds of the government. The result is a skilfully balanced and very readable narrative. It is prefaced with a four-page foreword by her son Richard Pankhurst, in which he reflects on the changes at which his mother might have rejoiced and mourned in the half-century since her death.

If this book appeals then you might like to try *Grandmother's Footsteps* by Charlotte Moore.



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