

Suffragette sisters at war

SYLVIA PANKHURST: THE REBELLIOUS SUFFRAGETTE BY SHIRLEY HARRISON (Golden Guides Press £17.99)

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In September 1960, the body of an elderly Englishwoman was buried with extraordinary ceremony in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Three thousand mourners gathered for the State funeral at Holy Trinity cathedral from where the coffin, draped in cloth of gold, was taken for burial in a tomb inscribed with the name, 'Walata Christos', or Daughter of Christ.



Campaigner: Sylvia Pankhurst's approach to suffrage was at odds with her mother's and sister's more militant methods

It was a ceremony wildly at odds with the serious, frugal and rather austere character of the woman in whose honour it was held.

But something about its eccentricity made it a strangely appropriate celebration of the life of Sylvia Pankhurst, the pioneering suffragette whose passionate commitment to changing the world led her throughout her long life into all sorts of extreme situations.

As a young activist for votes for women she was imprisoned in Holloway jail where she endured violent force-feeding. She formed an intense friendship with the married Labour politician, Keir Hardie, and in midlife she corresponded with Lenin.

At the age of 45 she had an illegitimate son, Richard, whose father was her lover, Silvio Corio, an Italian anarchist socialist. But late motherhood did nothing to diminish her political fervour.

During the Second World War, she infuriated the British Government by meddling - as they saw it ('Sylvia Pankhurst is a blister', wrote one infuriated official) in Ethiopian affairs.

Her support for the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, who was forced to seek refuge in Britain after his country was invaded by Italian Fascist troops in 1936 won her the enduring friendship of the Ethiopian Royal family, and in 1956 the Emperor offered her son, Richard, a post at the University of Ethiopia, inviting Sylvia, too, to make her home in Addis Ababa. So at the age of 74, Sylvia, uprooted herself from her suburban home in Woodford Green and relocated to Ethiopia, where she would die six years later



Torture: A suffragette is force-fed in prison

Sylvia Pankhurst was born in 1882, the second daughter of Dr Richard Pankhurst and his wife, Emmeline, who was 23 years his junior. Richard was a brilliant barrister and a founder member of the socialist Fabian Society, together with the playwright George Bernard Shaw and the novelist, H.G. Wells.

The Pankhursts had five children - three daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, and two sons - Frank, who died young, and Harry, the youngest, born in 1889. Though Sylvia adored her father, both her parents were preoccupied with politics and family life was distinctly austere.

'Drudge and drill, drudge and drill', was Dr Pankhurst's favourite maxim. And while Christabel shared her mother's glamorous looks and passion for elegant clothes, Sylvia was perpetually untidy and uninterested in her appearance.

SUFFRAGETTE FACTS

- **The term ‘suffragette’ was coined by the Daily Mail to distinguish the women from earlier campaigners for increased suffrage.**
- **In 1913, PM Asquith brought in the Cat and Mouse Act, which meant hunger strikers could be released when very weak but rearrested on trivial charges if they recovered**
- **To raise funds, the Suffragettes sold products designed by Sylvia in purple, white and green - the movement’s colours**

It was while Emmeline and Christabel were abroad that Dr Pankhurst died suddenly.

His death atomized the family emotionally. Sylvia and her younger siblings, Adela and Harry, who had been present at their father’s deathbed, became detached, not just from Emmeline and Christabel but from each other. Adela left a desolate picture of family life after her father’s death:

‘Mother was now involved in public work. We had no friends, we played no games and went nowhere... she took no interest in our affairs. ‘Christabel seemed at a distance, Sylvia hopelessly depressed... Public life was a relief to her...’

Emmeline seems to have been a ghastly mother, at least to her youngest children.

She refused to allow poor Harry to wear spectacles, thus making it impossible for him to study at school and, effectively, blighting his life.

Adela, meanwhile, unable to attract her mother’s attention, eventually emigrated to Australia, her departure vigorously encouraged by Emmeline.

Political agitation was Emmeline’s real love. ‘This is what I call life!’ she remarked to Sylvia in 1905, planning her retaliation as the first women’s Franchise Bill was talked out in Parliament.

Sylvia was characteristically shocked. In her mind, social reform wasn’t supposed to be enjoyable. As the struggle for women’s suffrage began to involve more violent and extreme demonstrations, a rift opened between Sylvia and her mother and elder sister.

Emmeline, and particularly Christabel, were keen on showy violence. Christabel was seldom in the thick of the action herself.

She argued that she couldn’t be an effective leader from prison, and at one stage fled to Paris in a series of dramatic disguises, which delighted the Press.



Mother: Sylvia Pankhurst with her son Richard

But she saw violence as an effective campaigning method, and was particularly keen on arson - she once sent Sylvia a note demanding that she burn down Nottingham Castle.

Sylvia's fervour took a gentler form. She preferred to argue her case in journalism, books and social work in the poverty-stricken East End of London. But unlike Christabel, she was repeatedly sent to prison, where she suffered appallingly.

In 1918, women over the age of 30 finally won the vote. It should have been a moment of triumph for the Pankhursts - but it was tainted by the estrangement between Christabel, who was becoming increasingly right-wing and Sylvia, who remained true to her father's ideals of pacifism and socialism.

Emmeline died in 1928, living just long enough to see women fully enfranchised, but it was not until 1953 that the sisters were reconciled.

Christabel, now living in Hollywood, wrote to Sylvia, 'Your mind often goes back, I know, as mine does to those good years of our childhood, when we still had Father and Mother and the home they made for us...'

It seems sad that two sisters with a common feminist cause should have spent so much of their lives estranged, but Shirley Harrison's diligent biography of Sylvia doesn't probe too deeply into the psychology of their relationship.

Sylvia was, after all, overshadowed from childhood onwards by her more beautiful and charismatic elder sister, so it is only fair that her biography should allow her, at last, to take centre stage.

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