A Suffragette in America

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Reflections on Prisoners, Pickets and Political Change

E. Sylvia Pankhurst

Edited and with an Introduction
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PLUTO PRESS

First published 2019 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Frontispiece credit: Box 69, National American Woman Suffrage Association Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3937 5 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3936 8 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0454 9 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0456 3 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0455 6 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

Katherine Connelly

Passenger number 12 on the SS *Oceanic* which set sail from Southampton to New York on 3 January 1912 was Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst, 29 years old, female, single. Occupation: artist. Immigration officials asked her if she had been to America before, to which she replied she had previously visited a year earlier, as well as asking whether she was a polygamist and whether she was an anarchist, to which she replied no. Asked if she had been to prison, she said yes and added proudly 'twice as a suffragette' – words that were duly entered on the passenger list.[1]

* * *

In January 1911, Sylvia Pankhurst undertook a lecture tour of North America which lasted just over three months, and she would return for a second tour of similar length in January 1912. In the course of these tours, she travelled thousands of miles undertaking a frenetic schedule of engagements: 'I travelled almost every night, and spoke once, twice or thrice a day.'[2] She did all this to tell audiences about the militant suffragettes' struggle for votes for women in Britain, a struggle in which she was an active participant.

Lecture tours provided opportunities to amplify the suffragettes' own story of the campaign as well as a chance to embarrass and put pressure on the British government by winning over crowds in the wider English-speaking world. In Canada, the suffragettes appealed for solidarity for their cause within the British Empire. America, by contrast, allowed access to a self-consciously modern nation. When Sylvia first arrived in America, women already had the right to vote in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho and Washington, DC.

During her first tour, Sylvia was promoting the book she was still hastily finishing – *The Suffragette: The History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement, 1905–1910*. By the time of her second tour in 1912, the book had been published in Britain and America, making Sylvia one of the first historians of the suffragette movement. Written at a

time of increasing state repression of the campaign, the book uncritically reproduced the heroic narrative propagated by the leaders of the militant suffragettes' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Sylvia's mother Emmeline and older sister Christabel Pankhurst. Sylvia suppressed any expression of her own misgivings about the growing elitism of the campaign, its marginalisation of working-class women and its increasing hostility towards the socialist and labour movements from which it had sprung. The two voyages to North America removed Sylvia from the intense political and personal pressures of the British suffragette movement – and it was here that she began to conceive of a very different book.

In 1911, Sylvia's tour took her from New York, Boston and Philadelphia on the East Coast, through the states of the Midwest as far south as Kansas, before travelling north to Canada where she spoke in Ottawa and Toronto, and then through New York State to Washington, DC. These were followed by more engagements on the East Coast and then a journey across the country to Colorado and California. After this she returned to New York, speaking in Kansas, Michigan and Maryland on the way. Sylvia was feted by some of America's wealthiest suffragists and her lectures were booked into the largest venues in the towns and cities she visited. She was put up in grand, modern hotels but she also spent days travelling on sleeper trains which broke down in the middle of the night, disrupting carefully planned itineraries.

The 1912 tour was organised around a sparser series of engagements; the novelty of the first tour could not be replicated and the escalation of militancy in Britain was alienating some former supporters. This afforded Sylvia a greater opportunity to determine her own schedule and to explore beyond the elitist boundaries in which much of the American suffragist movement was contained. Wanting to 'see a Socialist city', Sylvia spent a week in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where a socialist mayor had recently been elected.[3] Since touring British suffragettes had not yet been to the South, she also decided to go to Tennessee, where she encountered the legacy of slavery and challenged racial segregation. This time there were fewer elegant hotels. In her writings and letters, she described staying in a shabby, provincial hotel in Lebanon, Tennessee, to speak to a group of socialist students; in Canada's St John, she stayed in the home of the progressive Hatheway family and in the early morning was driven to the railway station in a sledge across the snowy landscape; in Chicago, she stayed with her cousin's family (her father's brother, John

Pankhurst, had emigrated to America in his youth) only to find herself frustrated with the 'empty headed' wife of the household.[4] Significantly, it was the more challenging 1912 tour that provided most of the material for Sylvia's writings on America.

In her later memoirs of this period, published in 1931 as *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*, Sylvia would record a breathtaking (though selective) list of public speaking engagements and exciting personalities. These features are not, however, present in the manuscript she produced at the time; the reader will search in vain for the names of so many of the pathbreaking reformers and radicals of this era that Sylvia met: Jane Addams, Crystal Eastman, Rose Schneiderman, Lillian Wald, Alice and Irene Lewisohn – none of them are mentioned by name, though their presence lingers just below the textual surface. Sylvia herself endeavours to join these figures in the margins, remaining true to her stated intention in the Preface not to provide 'a chronicle of my travels' but instead to write of 'experiences of people, places and institutions'; she briefly introduces herself as 'a militant suffragette' as a means of explaining her access to such a range of American society (p. 65). She avoided detailing her own extensive itinerary, writing instead about other people, most of them anonymous, who taught her about contemporary America.

Sylvia's lecture tours took place at an exciting time in American history, later termed the 'Progressive Era'. Aggressive, capitalist expansion and innovation saw huge fortunes amassed by a few through the exploitation of the many. The American working class was developing rapidly as women, African Americans, Native Americans and immigrants were increasingly dragged into its ranks. At the same time, this process produced growing resistance to inequality. The ideas of feminists, socialists, trade unionists and reformers provided hope to those embroiled in bitter, desperately fought battles to shape the future.[5] Sylvia was deeply struck by the disparity between what was possible and the reality in modern America. She explored this contrast in her speeches: 'As I have gone through your country, I have been filled with admiration for its ingenuity and its wonderful progress and enterprise. But everywhere I see such poverty, such overcrowding of cities, such wretchedness of many.'[6]

Sylvia echoed these words in the Preface here, contrasting the 'endless possibilities of new growth' in America with its 'cruel waste of precious human energy' (p. 66). The disregard for human life that accompanied

the growth of modern capitalism was starkly realised on 25 March 1911 when a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City and 146 workers, mostly women from immigrant backgrounds, were killed. Sylvia was in America when this took place and it would impact on her speeches and on this work.

The lecture tours of America provided Sylvia with the opportunity to explicitly situate the demand for women's political emancipation as a part of wider struggles against oppression and disempowerment which sustained capitalist exploitation. This approach is reflected in her manuscript's concern with the way working-class experience interacts with the oppression of women and with racism. In so doing, Sylvia begins to articulate her view of democracy as an instrument to dismantle inequality by providing all with an equal voice. On her return to Britain, Sylvia sought to apply these ideas to the militant suffragette movement, with profound political and personal consequences. This manuscript, which Sylvia did not complete and which has not previously been published, allows us to hear Sylvia's voice at a crucial moment of her political development. This introduction is about how Sylvia came to write the manuscript, her tours of America and how they impacted on suffrage history.

FROM AMERICA TO EAST LONDON: CHANGING THE COURSE OF SUFFRAGE HISTORY

If things had happened differently, Sylvia Pankhurst would have designed murals to adorn the walls of a chapel in a women's prison in Boston, Massachusetts. The project, worked out with the prison governor whilst Sylvia was engaged with her 1911 lecture tour, appealed to Sylvia's interest in the plight of prisoners and her belief in the emancipatory potential of art – the prisoners themselves would be trained to help in the work. During the 1912 lecture tour, Sylvia began to make plans: if she was offered a studio in Boston, she would stay for the summer, then embark on another series of lectures before returning home.[7] Perhaps she would not return at all; towards the end of her 1911 tour she had told reporters in Philadelphia that she found the United States 'delightful', adding 'I would even like to live here. This desire, I must confess, is largely due to the lack of fog, which is so depressing at home in London.'[8]

She would later recall the way in which America captured her imagination: 'Life in the States seemed a whirl, with harsh, rude extremes,

rough and unfinished, yet with scope and opportunity for young people and with more receptivity to new ideas than is found in the old countries: I thought that some day I might become an American citizen.'[9]

Thirty years on from those tours, during the Blitz, when Sylvia was living in Woodford, in Essex, 'directly on the Luftwaffe's flight path to London', she reminisced about these years to her teenage son Richard.[10] He later remembered, 'she recalled that had things been otherwise we might then have been American citizens.'[11] Had things been otherwise. But on 1 March 1912, stones flung in London reverberated around the world and changed everything.

Sylvia was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when she heard the news. In Britain, the Conciliation Bill, which proposed to enfranchise around a million women who were heads of households, was now faced with a rival Reform Bill introduced by the government – with no mention of women's suffrage. The apparent possibility of a more democratic women's suffrage amendment in the Reform Bill served to justify government opposition to the Conciliation Bill. The actual prospect of a women's suffrage amendment was uncertain (and would eventually be ruled out), especially as Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was a well-known opponent. Sensing betrayal, the WSPU leadership announced an escalation of suffragette militancy: 'The argument of the broken pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics', declared Emmeline Pankhurst.[12] Two weeks later, at 4 p.m. on 1 March 1912, women strolling through London's West End pulled out hammers, clubs and stones and smashed the windows of the fashionable department stores. Emmeline Pankhurst threw stones through the windows of 10 Downing Street. An arrest warrant was issued for the WSPU's leaders; Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence and Emmeline Pankhurst were charged with conspiracy, but the authorities could not find Christabel Pankhurst.

A few weeks later, Sylvia found herself at the centre of the rumours concerning Christabel's whereabouts. Major George William Horsfield of the Essex and Suffolk Royal Artillery was certain he had seen her on the passenger liner bound for New York City. 'No one who has ever seen her aggressive-looking face, with its overhanging black eyebrows, could make a mistake', he told a reporter from the *New York Times*. The newspaper's front page announced 'Miss Pankhurst Is In Hiding Here', and continued that it 'understood' she had held a secret conference with Sylvia in New York, who gave her sister the proceeds from her tour before departing to direct the struggle in London.[13]

In fact, the Major had made a mistake: no such meeting ever took place. The events that led up to Christabel's disappearance, however, convinced Sylvia that she had to return to England. Her mother faced months, perhaps years, of imprisonment and so it was clear that the movement was not on the threshold of victory. Sylvia concluded: 'I neither could nor would now withdraw to another country, nor immerse myself in any large work unconnected with the movement.'[14]

On her return from America, Sylvia travelled in disguise to Paris where she had been informed Christabel was hiding. There she found that Christabel did not envisage handing any organisational control to those she distrusted politically, including Sylvia. Christabel, it seems, would not have minded if Sylvia had stayed in America – indeed, Sylvia later recalled that Christabel's advice at this time was to '[b]ehave as though you were not in the country!'[15] It was advice that Sylvia entirely disregarded. Concerned that an elitist campaign relying upon ever smaller numbers of activists would be inadequate to overcome government opposition and the increasing levels of state repression, Sylvia attempted to transform suffragette agitation into a mass movement. She began by organising a series of huge demonstrations over the summer to support the imprisoned WSPU leaders, and then, more fundamentally, by taking steps to galvanise mass, working-class involvement.[16] She would initiate this latter project in East London where she aimed 'not merely to make some members and establish some branches [of the WSPU], but [at] the larger task of bringing the district as a whole into a mass movement, from which only a minority would stand aside'.[17] In the autumn of 1912, she looked for a suitable headquarters for this East London campaign. She later recalled that: 'I set out with Zelie Emerson down the dingy Bow Road' and found a shop to rent.[18]

What followed is familiar to suffrage historians. Sylvia and the East London suffragettes were expelled from the WSPU in 1914 after Sylvia appeared on a platform supporting the victimised workers of the employers' lockout of trade unionists in Dublin. Forming the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), they continued to organise a radical campaign which linked women's political emancipation to labour struggles and Irish anti-imperialists. The ELFS's divergence from the WSPU would become most starkly apparent with the outbreak of the First World War, when Emmeline and Christabel announced that the WSPU would suspend campaigning for the vote and support the war effort, while Sylvia and the ELFS established community services to

support working-class women facing further hardship in wartime, and eventually adopted an explicitly anti-war stance.

The developments of 1912, then, are understood to have had a profound impact on the history of the suffrage movement in Britain. Less well understood, however, is what prompted Sylvia to take the action she did then, when previously she had kept her political differences with her mother and sister private. Sylvia's lecture tours of America in 1911 and 1912 traverse her dramatic change of approach. Yet few connections have been drawn between the transatlantic change in Sylvia's environment and the change she effected soon after in the suffragette movement.[19] Moreover, with the expanding historiographical interest in the role of friendship networks in feminist campaigns, it is surprising that there has been so little attention afforded to the fact that Sylvia outlined that, from the outset, she was supported in her East London endeavour by Zelie Emerson, a young American woman who she met on tour.[20]

It seems that it was in the midst of creating the East London suffragette campaign that Sylvia was writing her book about America: a reference in Chapter 4 to something happening 'now' was provided with a handwritten footnote reading 'February 1913' (p. 105). Sylvia was particularly busy in February 1913. Early in that month, she and Emerson opened a new suffragette headquarters on East London's Roman Road. On 14 February, the two were arrested and imprisoned for window smashing only to be released after Emmeline Pankhurst had their fines paid (perhaps to keep them from the limelight). On 17 February, Sylvia and Emerson again smashed windows during an East London suffragette protest and were sentenced to prison, this time to two months' hard labour without the option of a fine. In protest at their treatment they undertook hunger and thirst strikes and endured the horrors of forcible feeding. At the end of the first month, Emerson was so tormented by her experience that she had tried to cut through an artery, while Sylvia forced her own release through adopting a rest strike – walking continuously, day and night, up and down the prison cell.

It was in this context that Sylvia was recalling her American experiences. She evidently envisaged speedy publication of the American book: it is full of topical references and up-to-date figures while, as will be discussed, potentially compromising personal details associated with the manuscript's origin were carefully expunged, indicating preparation for public consumption. It was apparently never sent to a publisher, probably because Sylvia did not complete the work. Some of the typescript was

evidently lost as it ends mid-sentence, though the planned end to that paragraph can be found in the handwritten copy which concludes with the words 'end of Chapter 8'.[21] Not, presumably, the intended end of the book.

Sylvia did not explain why she abandoned the work which she nevertheless preserved in her papers. The East London campaign certainly placed a huge demand on her time, but Sylvia always managed to sustain extensive written work alongside campaigning and imprisonments. Perhaps, rather, it was that the question Sylvia strove to resolve on paper, about how working-class people might truly articulate their own emancipation, was being answered in practice in the mass movement she was helping to create. The manuscript became part of the preparatory intellectual work for the movement which took priority as it further shaped and developed Sylvia's thinking. Placed in its context, this manuscript provides the link between Sylvia's private criticisms of the WSPU and the public action she would take to change the course of suffrage history.

AMERICAN LETTERS: EARLY DRAFTS

Sylvia's published writings on the suffragette movement, *The Suffragette* (1911) and *The Suffragette Movement* (1931), resemble the great nineteenth-century novels of her youth, with dense, descriptive prose and guiding linear narrative. Sylvia's American book forms a stark contrast when placed alongside them. The style here is experimental and changing, from the lyrical, dream-like evocation of a performance of *Sleeping Beauty* on New York's Lower East Side, to the empirical precision behind her critique of economic inequality, and the haunted tone of the nightmare vision of a prison in Tennessee. This immediate and thematic approach reflects the book's origins in Sylvia's writing during the course of the tour in the spare, quiet hours that she could find in train carriages and hotel rooms.

In a draft of the Preface, Sylvia mused over the title of the manuscript: 'I have called this book American Letters because' she wrote, before abandoning the sentence here and striking a vertical line down the whole page.[22] Whether or not this remained the intended title is unclear as there is no title page to the manuscript, but the explanation for this draft title is to be found in the final Preface: 'The following pages were in the first place written in the form of letters to a friend in England' (p. 65).

Keir Hardie

In the main, the letters were written to the Labour MP and former Labour leader, Keir Hardie. A long-standing friend of her parents, Sylvia grew better acquainted with Hardie after she moved to London as an art student. While her mother and sister initially established the WSPU where they lived in Manchester in 1903, they aspired to create a national campaign with its headquarters in the capital. Before Christabel moved to London in 1906 to take up the role of organising secretary, this task had initially fallen to Sylvia, who regularly sought the advice of Hardie, the WSPU's most steadfast supporter in Parliament. At some point, the relationship became romantic, for which the most decisive evidence remains the letters they exchanged whilst Sylvia was travelling in America. Her letters combined reflections on American politics and her expressions of love, loneliness and longing for Hardie's company. Filled with endearments – Hardie addressing her as 'sweetheart' while she began her letters 'Darling' and concluded with 'love and kisses my sweetheart' – these letters expressed a passion that was concealed from public view.[23] In 1879, Hardie had married Lillie Wilson from whom he was evidently emotionally as well as geographically distant; she lived with their children in Scotland far away from Hardie's Merthyr Tydfil constituency in South Wales and his London lodgings close to Parliament. The relationship was further complicated by developments in the suffragette movement, as Emmeline and Christabel insisted upon the separation of the WSPU from all political parties and expressed increasing hostility towards the Labour Party. Sylvia's letters from America, then, represented a personal and political rejection of WSPU policy. By the summer of 1913, the romantic relationship had become unsupportable for Sylvia, whose loyalties were painfully divided, though their friendship and political co-operation would last until Hardie's death two years later. The relationship between Sylvia and Keir Hardie, which produced the 'first draft' of the text, informed a prominent concern in the manuscript with the relationship between the women's and labour movements.

Hardie, as recipient of the first draft, was perhaps also the inspiration for Sylvia's attempt at writing an impressionistic work from letters. By the time Sylvia first embarked for America, Hardie had already undertaken quite extensive foreign political tours. During two tours of America, in 1895 and 1908 (he would travel there again, after Sylvia, in 1912), and a 'world tour' from July 1907 until April 1908, he wrote letters detailing

his experiences for publication in the British socialist press. These foreign travels enabled him to establish contact with socialists in other countries with whom he could discuss politics and share strategies, and it also allowed for him to amplify an internationalist, anti-racist political approach that was not universally held by other leading members of his own party. Departing from Liverpool in 1907, Hardie told the assembled farewell party 'that wherever he went he would refuse to recognise distinctions of colour of skin or of race or creed. He would see in all peoples his fellow-men only.'[24] In his letters from India, he denounced British imperialism and established fraternal contacts with the Congress movement for independence, causing uproar in the British establishment.[25] He published these letters shortly afterwards, in 1909, as a volume entitled *India: Impressions and Suggestions* in which he explained that though there were 'drawbacks' to basing the work on letters, he felt it justified as '[i]mpressions recorded while they are warm are more virile than when laboriously compiled out of stale memories.'[26] It seems likely that Sylvia perceived her own journey abroad in similar terms, as she too sought to establish international connections and use the opportunity to bring wider questions of inequality, particularly regarding workers' exploitation and racist oppression, to bear upon her organisation's narrowing political focus on suffrage. Like Hardie, Sylvia published her impressions in her organisation's press – her article 'Some American Impressions' appeared in the WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women* in April 1911 – and she planned to use her letters as the basis for a book.[27]

Hardie was evidently supportive of the idea that Sylvia adapt her letters for publication. In May 1915, conscious that he was dying, Hardie wrote to Sylvia about the objects he would like her to have, prominent among which were her American letters:

> I have a great many letters of yours, especially those from America, & a good many others. They are well worth preserving and I should like to return these to you. I could let you have the whole of those now at Nevill's Court; [Hardie's London home] & you could use your discretion as to which are worthy of being kept & published, and which should be destroyed.[28]

Much of the material in Chapters 2, 5 and 6 can be seen to draw on surviving letters to Hardie. The February 1913 date on the typescript indicates it was written before Hardie's death, which implies that Sylvia

made copies of, or detailed notes from, her letters before she sent them. It may be that considerably more of the book was derived from letters to Hardie that were destroyed or have been lost.

Emmeline Pethick Lawrence

Strictly speaking, there were two friends in England to whom letters from Sylvia formed the basis for her American book – something that has not previously been acknowledged.[29] In March 1911, the *Woman's Journal*, the organ of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, published Sylvia's letter to Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, the WSPU's treasurer and, with her husband Frederick, co-editor of the WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women*. In this letter Sylvia described her address to both houses of Iowa's state government in February. It was a historically important engagement; the only other woman to have been afforded this opportunity was the famous American suffragist leader Susan B. Anthony, who had spoken in favour of a married women's property Bill. When Sylvia spoke there in favour of a women's suffrage Bill, she thereby appeared as one of the leaders of the new generation of the women's movement. Her letter to Emmeline Pethick Lawrence therefore underscored the role of militant suffragettes in furthering the cause internationally: 'I thought of you all in England and held my head high as they all turned to stare at the English suffragette.'[30] This letter was largely incorporated into Chapter 7. Sylvia's decision to write the letter to Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, and not for example to her mother or sister, could be justified on the grounds that Pethick Lawrence's editorial role made her a suitable person to send her 'impressions' for publication. In hindsight, however, the decision appears revealing. By the time Sylvia was typing the manuscript in February 1913, Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence had been forced out of the WSPU, having disagreed with Emmeline and Christabel's policy of further escalating militancy. In contrast to her older sister, Sylvia remained lifelong friends with Emmeline Pethick Lawrence. When Sylvia's son Richard was born in 1927, she chose Keir Pethick as his middle names in tribute to her profoundly close relationships with Keir Hardie and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence – the same two people she chose to write to from America. The choice of recipients for these American letters, then, indicated Sylvia's growing estrangement from her mother and sister's politics and the emergence of her own dissenting voice.