

Suffragette Legacy

Suffragette Legacy:

*How does the History of
Feminism Inspire Current
Thinking in Manchester*

Edited by

Camilla Mørk Røstvik
and Ella Louise Sutherland

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INTRODUCTION

THE LEGACY OF THE SUFFRAGETTES

CAMILLA MØRK RØSTVIK
AND ELLA LOUISE SUTHERLAND

The suffragettes were more than one movement. The conference *Suffragette Legacy* was the starting point for this project, and sought from the beginning to invite diverse interpretation about the early women's rights movement. Refraining from a single narrative, we wished to bring together speakers who were inspired and challenged by the suffragette legacy today. Several of the papers encouraged us to think about the historical movement as complex rather than linear; made up of individuals rather than power structures. Diverse as they might seem, the outcome was an understanding of how we, as modern day people engaging with feminism, are intimately linked to our foremothers and fathers. After all, part of the lasting legacy of the suffragettes is the conversations and art that engage with their memories today. There is a lot of bravery in several of these papers, and by reading and thinking about them we ensure that their legacy, like that of the suffragettes, is not lost. From modern day suffragettes to furious activists, challenging scholarship to local history, this volume of voices mirrors the people it explores.

Chapter Overview

In her paper *Women, Peace and the Vote 1914–1918* Manchester-based suffragette historian **Dr Alison Ronan** explores the myths surrounding the main occupations for the women's movement during the First World War. Through national and local archive research, Ronan has studied the suffragettes and found much material biased. Her paper sets out to discover how the suffragettes not only fought for the vote, but were also passionately involved in the peace effort during the First World War. Focusing on the lesser-known working-class people of the movement, Ronan opens up a wider conversation about class in a time of extreme social hierarchy. By exploring the primary sources of the suffragettes, Ronan utilises their voices and connects women and peace in a fascinating way.

In PhD candidate **Sarah Feinstein's** (University of Manchester) paper, *Turning the Tables: Repertoires of Agency and Resistance in Manchester's Feminist Music Production and Distribution*, we discover the links between historical and contemporary women's movements through music. Arguing for a sensory exploration of the suffragette history, Feinstein draws on her extensive work at the Women's Revolution per Minute Archive Collection (WRPM) at Goldsmiths University and reimagines what the suffragette legacy might look and sound like. Turn up your Riot Girl collection and tune in for a fascinating sonic tour of feminism.

Dr Ben Halligan (University of Salford) is also concerned with what the feminist movement of today looks and sounds like. In his paper, "*My Uterus Doesn't Expel Rape Sperm: SlutWalk and the Activist Legacy of the Suffragettes*" he asks what the suffragette legacy offers today's feminist activists. Exploring the complexity of the feminist activity of "taking to the streets" Halligan considers the SlutWalk movement in the context of public protest. By combining photography, theory and discussion, he makes a case for the link between the suffragette movement and the Third Wave sex positive discourse. Halligan's thought-provoking essay is accompanied by his photography of a Manchester city centre Slut Walk and quotes from protesters.

In his paper *Force-feeding and the Legacy of the Suffragette Hunger Strike, 1909–14* **Dr Ian Miller** (University of Ulster) focuses on one of the most troubling historical realities concerning the suffragettes. His paper maintains that ethical questions of force-feeding explored by the Pankhurst and others, raised an important set of moral questions that have remained unresolved to this day, despite the formal condemnation of the practice by the World Medical Organisation in 1975 following the controversial deaths of a force-fed IRA prisoner. Furthermore, Miller argues that historical analysis of the suffragette anti-force-feeding campaign can be productively used to explore present-day discussion on the use of the procedure on detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Including graphic details, images and archival material in his paper, Miller does not shy away from exploring the extremely uncomfortable aspects of what some suffragettes endured.

In **Jessie Cohen** and **Olivia Graham's** paper *Proud to be Me*, the two scholars/artists/activists enter into dialogue with the current users of the Manchester Pankhurst Centre in Manchester. Taking place in the historical home of the Pankhursts, 62 Nelson Street, the *Proud to be Me* project is a contemporary piece of art-activism. Challenging beauty stereotypes and the media, the project consisted of photographs of the living women of the

centre, reimagined as modern-day suffragettes. Utilising suffragette aesthetics such as the green, white and purple sash, the modern Pankhurst women connect with the legacy of women's rights. Cohen and Graham write passionately about the use of feminism today, of the inclusion of all women in feminism and the dangers of media and academia forgetting those that need support today. The beautiful images that accompany their essay tell stories of their own.

Manchester-based poet **Rebecca Audra Smith** provided a creative outlet at the *Suffragette Legacy* conference, challenging the audience to make suffragette-based poetry then and there in the form of short poems; landays. Edited and contextualised by Smith, these poems made the audience of the conference part of the content. Crediting the audience and the suffragettes, these become a real collaboration between historical and contemporary people. Smith challenged the listeners to become participants, urging us to create word art quickly and effectively. With themes such as bra burning, Smith also wanted us to consider what we know and what we think we know about historical feminist activism. Her essay contextualises the poems in discussion about contemporary women's rights.

Likewise the Manchester-based performer and poet **Steph Pike** emphasises how the suffragettes are still in our language, in our minds and in our culture. Engaging directly with the people of Manchester, Pike's powerful poetry literally takes on board Audre Lorde's call to arms: "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury," and wants us to consider poetry as communication that is intense, direct and necessary. Every word is carefully chosen, a concentrate of words exploring Manchester as the city of suffragettes. Her poems, dedicated to historical and modern-day feminists, are powerful collections of truth, anger and hope.

White and Davies, also known as the art collective *Warp & Weft*, were inspired by suffragettes who made radical interventions in public spaces. They noticed that municipal statues in Manchester only celebrate notable men (barring Queen Victoria through accident of birth). Thus, with the Manchester Town Hall's permission, they started "yarnbombing" the male statues with masks representing Manchester women like Emily Wilding, the Pankhursts, Emily Wilkinson and Mary Seacole. At the conference, the collective presented their thinking behind this project and in their essay they contextualise the need for more female statues. Since the conference, the project has received a lot of media attention and has gone on to form new ideas and events. Accompanied by photography of their art work, White and Davies' piece is a reminder of the power of art in public spaces.

Writer, researcher and teacher **Stefanie Sabathy** (University of Manchester) was also interested in how a fictional conversation between suffragettes and modern women can make us question narratives. Her short story is about a discussion about Emmeline Pankhurst she had with some men in a pub. Her humorous and quirky take on Manchester's suffragette legacy is hopeful and subversive. As she engages the men in the pub in a conversation about suffrage, Sabathy breaks barriers and creates a universe in which Pankhurst inhabits our world again. As with so many feminist projects, her piece was inspired by a Pankhurst but ended up being her own fascinating contribution to the feminist canon.

Kellian Clink's paper (University of Minnesota) asks what young people learn about suffrage through a small, comparative study of British history textbooks. She highlights how frequently women's achievements are reduced to a few paragraphs and how, from 1945 to 2000, many of the same words and contexts are used to "explain" the suffragettes. Clink's paper is a reminder of the institutional sexism that contemporary feminists still seek to change, and is an apt reminder of the lack of women in school curriculum.

Finally, film directors and scholars **Nicola Gauld** and **Sima Gonsai** present their film project *Fight for the Right: The Birmingham Suffragettes*. The suffragettes from Birmingham are perhaps less known than the Pankhurst clan of Manchester, but their incredible stamina surprised Gauld and Gonsai when they started researching the material available in the city archives. *Fight for the Right* explored women's voting history from a local perspective, focusing specifically on the activities of the Birmingham suffrage movement in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The film's actresses are aged 12–15 from two local schools, and grew increasingly passionate about the story they were re-enacting. Using twenty-first century technology to explore a historical movement, the paper makes a case for art as a powerful decoder of myth. In their paper Gauld and Gonsai reflect on their experiences with the project, working with young women on a historical topic.

Each of these chapters will locate the suffragette herstory in different ways, and our hope is that this will not only contribute to new knowledge but in itself create a lasting legacy of how feminist histories can be interpreted, approached, celebrated and debated. After all, the suffragettes are dead. Long live the suffragettes!

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEGACY OF THE SUFFRAGETTES:
WOMEN, PEACE AND THE VOTE
IN MANCHESTER 1914–1918

DR ALISON RONAN

“Nothing worth having is achieved by violence.”¹



Fig. 1.1 Suffragette caravan (Oldham archives)

This is a story of the continued struggle for the vote during the First World War in Manchester, a struggle that was “sleeping not dead”² and which became increasingly synonymous with campaigns against the war and for a just, negotiated peace. Lillian Williamson Forrester, the young militant Manchester suffragette, imprisoned for her role in the attack on the Art Gallery in 1913, declared in 1916, while pregnant with her first

¹ Kathleen Courtney’s election address for the NUWSS executive, M50/2/9/11, January 1915, Manchester Archives.

² Report of a Manchester suffrage deputation to the local MP, *Manchester Guardian*, 15 September 1915.

child and somewhat paradoxically, that “The great duty of suffrage women [is] to speak peace.”³

It may be unusual to consider the significant legacy of the (militant) suffragettes by reflecting on the “end” of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) at the outbreak of war in 1914, but by examining in depth what happened in Manchester after 1914 it is possible to trace how the struggle for the vote continued in the city, and to examine the decisions made by some local suffragettes and a radical element of the constitutional suffragists after 1914. As the peace and suffrage agitator Catherine Marshall suggested in 1915: “I think we ought to put women’s suffrage absolutely first—as essential to the realisation of other things.”⁴ For her, and many other suffrage campaigners, the “other things” included women’s pay, conditions in the home and the workplace and the possibility of women having a say in post-war reconstruction. These issues became more and more pressing for suffragists as the war continued and local women’s involvement with anti-war campaigns not only sharpened their resolve for inclusion in the representative parliamentary process but also redefined their analysis of the relationship between gender, class and politics.

The Government released suffragette prisoners soon after the declaration of war in August 1914 and their leader, Mrs Pankhurst, now sympathetic to the Government’s stance on the war, ordered that all militant suffragette activity cease. The non-militant National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) also agreed to suspend their campaigning and to shift their energies into relief work; but the possibility of a general election dominated the domestic politics of 1915–1918 and there was a clear opportunity for women to be included in the franchise. An election was postponed in 1915 but the practicalities of war had drawn attention to the fundamental and contentious questions of voter registration and the limits of the existing franchise. The introduction of conscription in 1916 undermined the residential qualification for the men fighting at the front, and indeed the presence of soldiers on the frontline made the electoral register virtually redundant. This in turn led to a lively political campaign for the “soldiers’ vote” which offered politically astute women an opening in which they could influence the framing of a reconstituted

³ *Votes for Women*, September 1916.

⁴ Catherine Marshall in 1915, quoted in Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900–1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 135.

franchise.⁵ The way in which the war shifted popular views on women's suffrage was complex. The direct link between women's patriotic contribution to the war and their limited inclusion in the Representation of the People Act 1918 has been contested by historians.⁶ But it still remains a significant association; certainly the incontrovertible evidence of women's practical and political capability during the war was a decisive factor in shifting male prejudice against women's suffrage.⁷ As the Liberal Asquith (Prime Minister 1908–1916) whose handling of the pre-war 1910/1911 Conciliation Bills had so disillusioned the constitutional suffragists, stated in 1917:

I think some years ago I ventured to use the expression “let the women work out their own salvation.” Well, sir, they have worked it out during this war. How could we have carried on the war without them?⁸

So this has become the accepted narrative: that more or less, women who were fighting for the vote agreed to support the war effort and put their own demands on hold. However, the example of Manchester offers another narrative, that of a continued and quietly energetic campaign for the vote after 1914. What had begun for many local women in Manchester as a single-issue suffrage campaign gradually drew them into organisations during the war that were specially focused on exposing gender inequality and class exploitation. Wartime experience heightened their political consciousness. The granting of the vote to some women in 1918 did not mark the end of a fifty-year struggle for the vote; rather it marked the beginning of another set of struggles for social, political and economic equality that engaged political women during the inter-war years.⁹ As the local constitutional suffrage group in Manchester declared

⁵ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900–1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 134–136.

⁶ For example Jo Vellacott, *Pacifists, Patriots and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain During the First World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3; Holton, *Feminism*, 134.

⁷ Martin Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906–1918*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, 136; H.L Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866–1928*, (London: Longman, 1988), 61.

⁸ Asquith in House of Commons Debates, 28 March 1917, c.469–70 quoted in Pugh, *Electoral*, 146.

⁹ Cheryl Law, “The old faith living and the old power there: the movement to extend women's suffrage” in Joannou Maroula and June Purvis (eds.) *The*

in 1917, “We are clear that, with the vote won, our work will be just begun.”¹⁰

To use Manchester as a case study enables an interrogation of sustained albeit muted suffrage activity in a major industrialised city throughout the war, which was most likely replicated in the other industrialised cities across the country. This activity continued throughout the war and gathered pace after the establishment of the Speaker’s Conference in 1916, a committee set up by the Coalition Government putting forward proposals for franchise reform which would result in the Representation of the People Act in 1918. To put this campaigning activity into a clearer context, let us examine the situation in Manchester in the summer of 1914, immediately before the war. In the city there were numerous branches of the three large national suffrage organisations, and many branches of the smaller campaigning groups such as the Tax Resistance League, the Church League, the Writers League and an active Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage.

Firstly, there was the very active Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) with branches working largely on their own initiative; for example, they organised the Manchester Art Gallery outrage in 1913 and a local campaign of putting ink in letterboxes. Elizabeth Dean from the local Openshaw branch of the British Socialist Party, joined the Manchester WSPU in 1911 and recalled:

When the women’s suffrage movement was formed by the Pankhursts it was really—what would you put it—more middle-class. They took decisions in London and the carry-on that went on in London was really among the committee, you know. We were left to do any irritating things we could think about, on our own.¹¹

And they did! There was a city centre branch and branches in the suburbs, local women regularly selling the WSPU newspapers and organising regional speaking campaigns across the NW.

There was a regional and federated branch network of the mighty National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) with regular branch meetings with local organisers, each branch having a degree of autonomy to decide priorities. The NUWSS periodical *The Common*

Women’s Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ MSWS Annual report 1917: M50/1/5/3 Manchester Archives.

¹¹ Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women’s Suffrage Movement*, (London: Rivers Oram, 2000), 225.

Cause was sold in local newsagents and in the streets. By 1914 there were regional organisers in the NW for the Election Fighting Fund (EFF) which mobilised local working women to campaign for pro-suffrage candidates in local and by-elections. It was in effect a working partnership between the NUWSS and the Labour Party and it brought a different set of local organisers into the NUWSS machinery, many coming from socialist and working class backgrounds. There were at least two branches of the Women's Freedom League (WFL) across Manchester after its establishment by Mrs Despard in 1908. There was a branch in the city centre and a branch in the garden village of Burnage, built in 1907 and attracting co-operators, teachers and local reformers.¹²

Many women were well known in Manchester as suffrage activists and social reformers, in particular for women-focused campaigns, and many of them worked together much more fluidly across what seem to us now to be "rigid" boundaries. Hope Squires, for instance, the wife of music professor and conscientious objector Frank Merrick, was simultaneously a member of the WSPU and the WFL. It is clear from the papers of the Manchester Men's League for Women's Suffrage (MMLWS) [Frank Merrick was a member] that women (and men) were demonstrating together and that women activists in the city were working together across different campaigns and concerns.¹³ In a city like Manchester "everyone knows everyone, if not socially, at least by repute."¹⁴

The political trajectories of militant suffrage activists during the war were not always predictable: for example, Lillian Forrester, the secretary of the WSPU, imprisoned briefly after her attack on pictures in Manchester Art Gallery in 1913, became a member of the United Suffragists in 1915 and spoke out for peace. Her younger colleague Kate Wallwork, who took over from Forrester as secretary of the WSPU city centre branch, was accused of blowing up an empty railway carriage in Newton Heath, also in 1913. She was acquitted after a vigorous campaign by the MMLWS amongst others.¹⁵ Both women had supported the WFL campaign to boycott the census and both women evaded the 1911 census:

¹² The stockholders for Burnage Garden Village included a number of prominent local business men and philanthropists: M. Harrison, "Burnage Garden Village: An Ideal for Life in Manchester," *Town Planning Review* (47), 1976.

¹³ Manchester Men's League for Women's Suffrage, MML/1-2, John Rylands Library.

¹⁴ Letter from Julie Tomlinson to Catherine Marshall, D/MAR/4/45 21 October 1915, Cumbria Archives

¹⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July–9 August 1913.

as the slogan declared, “if we don’t count, don’t count us!”¹⁶

But both these women made remarkable decisions about where to put their energies during the war, both supporting peace campaigns, with Wallwork in particular becoming very active in the local branches of the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF). Forrester, whose son was born in 1915, campaigned with the United Suffragists and spoke out for peace during and after the war.

The wartime political route of Margaret Ashton, local councillor and doughty women’s rights and suffragist campaigner, was, ironically, easier to predict as she was an internationalist, a pacifist Unitarian and opposed to any form of militancy. By 1915 she was part of a group of suffragists in the executive of the National Union, who felt that “it is useless to ignore the war and to imagine that the Union can return to the state of affairs before the war broke out” but who had always spoken out against militancy and “continued to uphold the ideal of the supremacy of moral force in human affairs.”¹⁷ The campaign for the vote became part of a wider movement for prefiguring a different society where in Ashton’s words:

The women’s suffrage movement is based on the principle that social relations should be governed not by physical force, but by the recognition of mutual rights, by co-operation with other organisations working for these objects and in discussion with women of other nations, promote the establishment of a stable system of international law and mutual understanding upheld by the common will of men and women.¹⁸

In Manchester suffrage campaigners gradually became synonymous with peace campaigners, as they challenged the “party line” taken by their organisations’ leaders. In London in 1915, the NUWSS president Mrs Fawcett thought it “undesirable to take part,” when asked by the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) to send delegates to The Hague International Congress of Women (which was to replace the cancelled IWSA meeting in April 1915).¹⁹ Under Fawcett’s leadership, the national executive of the NUWSS took the line that any talk of peace, peace education or how to negotiate a peace, was tantamount to treachery. From London, the executive informed local societies across the country

¹⁶ Entries for the Wallwork family: 1901 and 1911 census. Wallwork’s name does not appear at her family home on the 1911 census, despite cross-referenced evidence that she had been living at home at that time. It is crossed out on the return.

¹⁷ *Common Cause*, 4 June 1915.

¹⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 June 1915.

¹⁹ NUWSS executive minutes, M/50/2/7/13 18 March 1915, Manchester Archives.

that they must not send delegates to the Congress. This executive decision threatened traditional branch autonomy and the entire democratic apparatus of the NUWSS. There was a groundswell of opposition in the provinces with protest letters from both the North West and North East Federations, whose presidents Margaret Ashton and Dr Ethel Bentham respectively were already vocal opponents of the war.

In March 1915 a number of the NU executive committee resigned, including Ashton from Manchester, Helena Swanwick, Catherine Marshall and Kathleen Courtney. Helena Swanwick who had worked with Ashton when she (Swanwick) lived in Knutsford and edited the *Common Cause*, recalled that when “none of the organised Suffrage Societies would consent to co-operate [with The Hague Congress]; an ad-hoc committee was formed to arrange a British contingent.”²⁰ This British Women’s Committee of the Women’s International Congress (BWCWIC) was joined by 156 women. Manchester women were on the BWCWIC executive committee from its inception in early 1915, and they included Margaret Ashton, Lila Brockway (wife of Fenner Brockway and instigator of No Conscription Fellowship (NCF) in 1914), Quaker Mrs Vipont Brown, and Alice Crompton from the University Settlement. Also members were the Unitarian Mrs Greg, suffragist Mrs Schuster and English lecturer Phoebe Sheavyn from the University.²¹ Twenty-four women were granted passports for The Hague, including Margaret Ashton from Manchester, Sarah Dickenson from Salford and Sarah Reddish from Bolton. These delegates were, however, unable physically to attend the Congress when the channel was closed by the Government, but they were prepared to support the aims of the Congress publicly.

1915 was a year of change and decision for political women. The suffragists were in turmoil over the war and the issues of peace and internationalism. Not all suffragettes were convinced by the shift towards an uncritical appraisal of the Government as endorsed by Mrs Pankhurst. In Manchester, in February 1915, six months after the beginning of the war, the police stopped a publicity van—the Press dubbed it a “wagonette” with a sardonic reference to the “suffragettes”—in St Peter’s Square: indeed the wagonette had previously been used by the WSPU but now it was advertising a new group—the United Suffragists. The police destroyed the van and took the organisers’ names and addresses, which included a Miss Cannon who had been in the WSPU.²² In March 1915, the

²⁰ Helena Swanwick, *I Have Been Young*, (London: Gollanz, 1935), 258–59.

²¹ See biographies of some of these women in Sybil Oldfield, *Doers of the Word: British Women Humanitarians 1900–1950*, Continuum, 2000, for more details.

²² *Votes for Women*, 12 March 1915.

Manchester branch of the United Suffragists (US) was established. As the WSPU disbanded, former members were absorbed into the newly emerging US branch in Manchester. Krista Cowman has noted that the emergence of the US in the summer of 1915 not only constituted a rethinking of the militant approach, but also, with its commitment to including all wings of the suffrage movement, it represented a clear platform for single-issue suffrage politics. She argues that this stance “made it [United Suffragists] an obvious rallying ground for any dissenters from the wartime policy of other suffrage groups and an important, almost unique, site of suffrage activity during the First World War.”²³ In Manchester the US attracted women who had been members of the local WFL and the WSPU. The US branch in Manchester included ex-WSPU Miss Cannon and the militant Lillian Forrester, the WFL activists Hope Merrick, Hope Hampson and a Miss Atkinson.²⁴ The inaugural meeting in 1915 was addressed by London-based US member and Women’s Hospital supporter Annie Somers. She talked about her work with the Women’s Hospital Corps which had established hospitals in Paris and at Wimereux near Boulogne under the auspices of Dr Garrett Anderson and Dr Flora Murray.²⁵ The other speaker was Independent Labour Party (ILP) activist and *Labour Leader* editor Fenner Brockway, explicitly linking the group to the anti-militarist policies of the ILP. Lillian Forrester declared “the great duty of suffrage women [is] to speak peace” and the meeting passed a resolution supporting peace and criticising the lack of the vote.²⁶ In June 1915, ten months after the declaration of war, the Manchester US branch organised a public city centre meeting titled “Why we keep the suffrage flag flying” with militant suffragette Mary Richardson and MMLWS activist Rev. Leigh Orton as headline speakers, and Lillian Forrester in the chair. The local branch booked the Onward Buildings in Deansgate for its monthly meetings. There were subtle shifts in the demands; previously the war women across the campaigns had argued for women to be granted the vote on the same terms as men but as *Votes for Women* pointed out in July 1916:

²³ Krista Cowman, “‘A party between revolution and peaceful persuasion’ a fresh look at the United Suffragists” in Maroula Joannou and June Purvis (eds.), *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

²⁴ *Votes for Women*, September 1916.

²⁵ Annie Somers graduated from London University (Birkbeck College) in 1910 with a BA EXT (Class: III), accessed 20 Feb 2008, www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/Davis/Names/Somers_Annie.html.

²⁶ MML1/1/1/, 26 April 1915. John Rylands Library

Our demand must change from “on the same terms” to ‘on as democratic a basis’— in case the Government amend the parliamentary register to include some fancy form of franchise (most probably a military service qualification) which, because it did not apply to women, would make the old demand “on the same terms”, meaningless.²⁷

The United Suffragists began to organise suffrage meetings in the “slums” [sic] during 1915 and by November 1915 the local branch had formed a Slum Propaganda Committee to raise awareness in working class communities about the continued campaign for the vote. There was a regular ‘Votes for Women’ United Suffragists’ campaign at factory gates in Ancoats.

The constitutional suffragists generally either remained in the constitutional National Union or decided to join the new Women’s International League (WIL) as it began to emerge in October 1915 after The Hague commitment to peace and suffrage. The WIL quickly developed in Manchester and the NW. The chair of the city centre branch was Margaret Renold, the daughter-in-law of the industrialist Hans Renold (who ran a munitions factory in south Manchester and was in close contact with Government); the secretary was Margaret Ashton, while Ashton’s old Local Government Association (LGA) colleague Olga Hertz and suffrage organiser Dorothy Smith were treasurer and organising secretary respectively. This committee was almost identical to the one formed earlier in the year as the BWCWIC. However, what was new was that this committee was deliberately recruiting members through the existing branch network of the NUWSS. WIL committee member Julie Tomlinson wrote to Catherine Marshall in the autumn of 1915:

Manchester has a full knowledge of the district and also a good deal of influence with all the NU members. A large proportion of our membership will be recruited from the NU. At our inaugural meeting of the [WIL] branch yesterday we had present as members of the WIL, the NU secretaries of Chinley, Hyde, Marple, and Whaley Bridge, former secretaries of Manchester, Knutsford, Farnworth, Rochdale, Wilmslow and Eccles and also enrolled as members but not present were secretaries of Bolton, Buxton and Heaton Moor.²⁸

²⁷ *Votes for Women* July 1916.

²⁸ Letter Tomlinson to Marshall, D/MAR/4/79, 21 October 1915. The letter was written on WIL Manchester branch paper which shows committee members and roles. Cumbria Archives.

The inaugural WIL meeting took place in October 1915, enrolling new members and creating an initial membership of 140. In Manchester, the branch attracted anti-war women like the Quakers' Constance Crosland, Agatha Watts and Mrs. Vipont Brown, who espoused the absolute pacifist position of their Quaker faith and who joined the WIL with its commitment to both peace and the vote. It also attracted women from the Independent Labour Party (ILP), such as anti-war activists Frances Melland, the Wilkinson sisters, Annot Robinson and Hannah Mitchell. There were plenty of other associations from the Manchester left. In 1916, Women's Labour League (WLL) organiser Mrs. Russell, Annot Robinson's old Ancoats neighbour and WLL colleague, became the WIL's northern regional organiser, setting up a number of local WIL branches in Heaton Moor, Longsight, Bowden and Hulme while supporting embryonic branches in Rochdale, Bolton, Farnworth, Stockport and Oldham. She was also instrumental in helping to develop other WIL branches across the North West, visiting Liverpool in early 1916 with a bundle of WIL literature and "both members and sympathisers descended like locusts upon it." There was a continuous recruitment drive for the WIL in Manchester after 1916. Branch recruitment still used the old NUWSS pattern of garden parties and drawing room meetings. Young undergraduate Mabel Phythian's diary noted a WIL "Tea" at Quaker Mrs Wilson's house in Didsbury in October 1916. By 1918, Mrs Wilson had become the Hon. Treasurer of the WIL Manchester branch. The Wilsons were affluent Quakers and active in the NCF; Wilfred Wilson was a cotton manufacturer and the family lived in Ford Lodge in Didsbury and would have been neighbours of Margaret Ashton's before she moved to Withington. The Phythian appointment diaries give an extraordinarily detailed account of the number of meetings locally.²⁹ The annual WIL report 1916/7 estimated an overall national membership of 3,576, with Manchester and Stockport having 573 and 40 members respectively. Socialists and EFF organisers and WIL activists Annot Robinson and Ellen Wilkinson were organising "Suffrage and Labour" clubs in the inner-city industrial areas of Ancoats and Beswick. Both local clubs had 70 and 50 members respectively and two other suffrage clubs started in the working-class area of Hulme and Salford. These contacts within working-class communities were reactivated through the women-led campaigns of the Women's Peace Crusade during 1917–1918.

²⁹ The Wilson dates are calculated from the 1901 census, accessed 9 June 2015, <http://www.1901censusonline.com>

Increasingly there were links between Manchester and other suffrage groups across the country; in 1916 the new members of the United Suffragists, Frank and Hope Merrick, held an exhibition and sale of modern art at their home in Parsonage Road in Withington to raise money for Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), which suggests that the Merricks anticipated a local sympathetic audience for the sale.³⁰ In 1917 US and ex-WSPU member Miss Cannon became a founder member of the local branch of the Women's Suffrage Federation (WSF) with another local young woman from North Manchester, Miss F. Wassilevski and her neighbour Miss Lieberman. A Mr Cannon and Isaiah Wassilevski were both in the ILP Central Manchester Branch, suggesting local socialist and familial influences on these young women.³¹ There were connections between the WSF and the US in Manchester; for example, in November 1917 Lillian Forrester (US) chaired a meeting of the local WSF in the city centre where Sylvia Pankhurst spoke on "Social Problems". Annot Robinson chaired another WSF meeting in early 1918.³² There were complex relationships between these local suffrage and anti-war societies; many shared members and there were also strong neighbourhood connections. In Manchester, as across the country, the local US branch affiliated to the emerging Adult Suffrage campaign.³³

Suffrage activity was erupting sporadically throughout the city in the years leading up to and during the Speaker's Conference. In early 1916, there was a large suffrage meeting in Manchester which included local representatives from the Manchester Suffrage Society and the Trades Council.³⁴ In May 1916 there was another joint meeting of suffragists and other societies in Manchester "to arouse public opinion to oppose [the] short sighted measures" of the Speaker's conference. In the same month the Church League for Women's Suffrage newsheet, *The Coming Day*, ran an editorial that explained, "After the Conciliation Bill in 1913 and the war, women have united to get the vote on the same terms as men, to get rid of the sex barrier, towards real adult suffrage."³⁵ In Manchester, the Church League had a lively branch, which involved the Misses Norbury

³⁰ *Votes for Women*, Vol. 9 no. 422, December 1916.

³¹ *Labour Leader*, 31 January 1918, Comrade Cannon was secretary of Longsight ILP.

³² *Labour Leader*, 27 November 1917 and 7 March 1918.

³³ *Votes for Women*, Vol. 9 no. 422, December 1916.

³⁴ *Labour Leader*, 20 January 1916.

³⁵ *The Coming Day* newsheet of the Church League for Women's Suffrage M47/1/2, May 1916. Manchester Archives.

(WLL) from Worsley in North Manchester.³⁶ From the outset of war, the Church League had urged its members to wear their suffrage badges when doing any other public work, to make their commitment to women's suffrage absolutely explicit. The establishment of the Speaker's Conference in 1916, a committee to report on the state of the franchise, focused women once again on their demand for the vote. However, *Votes for Women* and the annual reports of the Manchester Suffrage Society and the WIL newsletters give a real sense of the exasperating and unhurried progress of the Conference. Women's suffrage was still controversial.

By 1916 there was a groundswell of grassroots support in both the women's suffrage and labour movements for *universal adult suffrage*. Many suffrage women were joining the campaign for Adult Suffrage (AS) and from the outset at least two Manchester women, Margaret Ashton and Annot Robinson, were on the NCAS General Committee based in London. No details of its local membership have survived but the national AS campaign involved people from across the range of anti-war groups, such as the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR), the WIL, the NCF and the ILP.³⁷ In October 1916 in Manchester there was a "conference of suffragists" held in the city centre where NCAS executive member Henry Nevinson was the main speaker.³⁸ In February 1917 there was another suffrage conference, this time organised by the Manchester and Salford Joint Suffrage Societies, where adult suffragists Margaret Ashton and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and founder of the WFL, Mrs Despard, were the main speakers.³⁹ These three women had shifted their pre-war stance which had favoured a suffrage on the same terms as men, i.e. a limited suffrage, to a position of support for universal adult suffrage. In the same month Margaret Ashton chaired a large NCAS demonstration in the Kingsway Hall in London. Local US branch news in *Votes for Women* reported support for Adult Suffrage from suffrage campaigners in Manchester. US member Hope Merrick pressed for AS at a meeting in late 1916, while her husband Frank (CO after 1916 and imprisoned in 1917 until 1920) had chaired a Manchester Suffrage conference in November 1916 which called for universal adult suffrage.

³⁶ <http://www.1901censusonline.com>, accessed 9 June 2015. Margaret Norbury (b. 1858), Mary Norbury (b. 1886) and Helen Norbury (b. 1893). They lived in Worsley in North Manchester.

³⁷ Albert Dawson and St George Heath from FoR were also on the Executive of the NCAS: *Votes for Women* Vol. 9 no. 423, Feb 1917.

³⁸ *Labour Leader*, 26 October 1916.

³⁹ *Labour Leader*, 22 February 1917.

From March to July 1916 suffrage/peace activists were also organising a specific and localised campaign to complete a Peace Memorial, a national petition demanding that the Government negotiate a “just” peace settlement. These petitions were subject to censure under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA); collecting signatures for the memorial therefore became a struggle in itself, as Catherine Marshall’s suffragist mother commented from Keswick in the Lake District in 1916: “I am sure there are many more who would like to sign whose husbands or circumstances will not let them. I have tried to be v careful not to compromise by word or deed. We are literally in a reign of terror.”⁴⁰ In August 1916, another Manchester memorial/petition was started by the local suffrage groups, urging the Speaker’s Conference to enfranchise women “so that they shall take part in the election of the Parliament which will deal with the problems of reconstruction after the war.” This memorial was sent to Lloyd George in March 1917. The memorial gathered over 4,000 signatures from “influential and representative persons” from the 26 constituencies that circled Manchester, from Accrington to Wigan.

Locally, campaigners also kept up the pressure on the Speaker’s Conference in the North West through their pre-war Labour contacts, encouraging local trade unions and “other political organisations” to send resolutions to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary about the need for women’s inclusion in the reform of the franchise. Locally the meetings for Adult Suffrage were often seen as inextricably linked to meetings about peace.⁴¹ The first Russian Revolution in the spring of 1917 brought together other different groupings of suffrage activists, pacifists, socialists—and occasioned a celebratory meeting in London where the main speakers, Maude Royden (FoR), Henry Nevinson (NCAS) and George Lansbury (FoR) were all members of the executive of the NCAS, and they were in this instance joined by the Jewish political activist Israel Zangwill.⁴² There were many local meetings in Manchester and the surrounding towns to celebrate the Revolution and to instigate the setting up of local Workers and Soldiers Councils on the Russian model. In Manchester, as elsewhere, these meetings were disrupted and often prohibited.⁴³

Suffrage women were involved in the No Conscription Fellowship and the Women’s International League and in July 1917 many of them

⁴⁰ Letter Marshall to Marshall D/MAR/2/34, 13 July 1916. Cumbria Archives.

⁴¹ *The Call*, 5 October 1916. Manchester Archives.

⁴² *Labour Leader*, 29 March 1917, and also a list of names that comprised the NCAS dated in pencil October 1916, uncatalogued, D/MAR 3/26.

⁴³ *The Call*, 16 Aug 1917. Manchester Archives.

organised a demonstration of the Women's Peace Crusade in Manchester, one of a series of spontaneous crusades for a negotiated peace which erupted across the country over the following two years. There were 123 crusades reported in the *Labour Leader* throughout 1917-1918 which ran a weekly column about the Crusade.

However, this localised suffrage/peace activity was often not reported in the radical press. The *Labour Leader*, the *Daily Herald* and the *Call* tended to concentrate on anti-conscription, anti-war and socialist campaigns. However, Sylvia Pankhurst's *Dreadnought*, United Suffragist's *Votes for Women* and the WIL newsletters maintained a spotlight on the continuing suffrage campaign and kept activists informed about local and national events. But peace was also on the agenda and in Manchester there was a noticeable growth during 1916 to 1917 of local branches of the NCF, the WSF and the FoR, while the WIL was expanding its branch network across the North West. Manchester ILP and suffrage activists were continuously speaking out against the war: some Manchester socialist women were travelling around the country as anti-war propagandists, such as the young Muriel Wallhead who was at Nottingham ILP and Leigh ILP in August 1916 talking about "The futility of war" while also pleading for internationalism. WIL members Margaret Ashton and Helen Swanwick were touring ILP branches in London and across the North West, speaking about peace and the settlement.

It has been possible to locate a strong local suffrage movement in Manchester throughout the war, built on the foundations of pre-war suffrage activity. The MSWS Annual Report of 1917 confirmed that there was an ongoing suffrage campaign in Manchester among the local young women munitions workers who were "annoyed" at not being included in the provisional clauses of the bill and there were other local meetings involving non-unionised women in the sewing trades and in the engineering industries. These meetings had been instigated by the Women's War Interest Committee (which included suffrage and peace women from WIL/NCF) and concentrated on the issues of wages, conditions of work and pay and the importance of union organisation and how these issues related to the suffrage. There were also dedicated meetings about the vote which were held at work gates of the local munitions factories, for example Stubbs in Openshaw and Ferranti at Hollinwood, although the report cedes ruefully that the meetings were "uphill work."⁴⁴ Some of these campaigns echo the initiatives that were being made by the United Suffragists in the "slums" [sic] during 1915.

⁴⁴ MSWS Annual report 1917-1918, M50/1/4/47. Manchester Archives.

Eventually the terms of the Bill became clear and the Representation of the People Act of February 1918 enfranchised nearly 8.5 million women over 30, either because they were married to local government electors or because they qualified as local government electors in their own right.

The suffrage campaign in Manchester was sustained with quiet energy throughout the war. The different ways in which the war touched women's lives meant that there were different personal levels of commitment to the anti-war and suffrage campaigns although examples of simultaneous membership of a range of radical organisations is astonishing. The result of the 1918 election was a blow for the suffrage women while the terms of the peace in 1919 were shocking for the anti-war women throughout the country, as WIL declared: "This International Congress of Women [Zurich 1919] abides by the principle laid down by The Women's Congress at The Hague in 1915, that we do not admit war as a means of settling differences between peoples."⁴⁵ Many of them shifted their focus into famine relief work in Germany, relieving the effects of the post-war Allied blockade.

Manchester is a city of peace, with a sense of its radical past. The suffrage campaigners who translated their activism into peace work while still agitating for the vote are inspirational. We might echo the socialist pacifist Phillis Skinner (ILP/NCF) who addressed Manchester in 1917: "Comrades, we've a lot of work to do!"⁴⁶ The women who battled for the vote and for a lasting peace during a time of total war remain an inspiration for us all.

⁴⁵ Final resolution WIL Zurich conference, 1919, Swarthmore Peace Archive.

⁴⁶ *Manchester Conscientious Objectors' Journal*, November 1918 DX/76/8 HUA. Hull University.

