

The Weaker Sex? Violence and the Suffragette Movement

In the early hours of a mild November morning in 1913, a three-inch pipe was primed to explode later and destroy the multiple panels and ornate metal work that made the Glass House 'one of the chief attractions' of Alexandra Park in Manchester. A smouldering mass of twisted metal and broken glass was discovered and quickly attributed by the popular press to the wave of 'suffragette outrages' being committed across the country by the militant branch of the women's rights movement. Kew Gardens had already suffered two attacks, on an orchid house and pavilion, and the campaign of arson and intimidation conducted by the militant wing of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and their supporters was reaching its height.

Although no one was ever convicted of the Alexandra Park attack, its perpetrator is believed to have revealed herself in a later unpublished autobiography. Dedicated to the 'Political, Economic, Religious and Sex Freedom of Women', it was the work of Kitty Marion, music hall artist and militant suffragette. Her anger at the treatment of women on the stage, an industry where she was expected to trade sex in return for leading roles and allow patrons of the music halls to assault her in cabs and hotels without complaint, led her to become a bomber, an arsonist and a public campaigner for the suffragette movement. Her autobiography is a testament to her importance as a militant advocate for women's rights, yet the majority of historians of the women's movement have disregarded this source. Only recently has it begun to be referenced as an important narrative, containing eyewitness accounts of the clandestine operations of the militant suffragette movement in Edwardian England. Few personal accounts of the actions of these suffragettes survive and its history was written by the figureheads of the WSPU – the Pankhurst family in particular. It is their legacy, and the protectors of that legacy, which have shaped memories of the actions of this group of determined, dangerous women, whose campaign methods ranged from window-breaking to arson attacks, bombings, even suicide attempts.



Surveillance photograph set issued by the police to public galleries, identifying dangerous militant suffragettes, including Kitty Marion (13), 1914. National Portrait Gallery, London

So why have historians failed to fully engage with the issue of suffragette violence? The work of the 1926 Suffragette Fellowship, which collected and recorded for posterity memories and artifacts from militant suffragettes, was dominated by 'the argument of the broken pane'. This single phrase has come to define 'authentic' militancy and, at the same time, marginalise any act that falls outside this image. Acts of militancy are thus reduced to the story of no more than a few broken windows, while the historical focus shifts to the bodily violations forced on the suffragettes, especially those imprisoned for political violence: denial of political rights and, later, force feedings. The actions of women such as Kitty Marion are largely forgotten.

While the majority of historians would balk at describing any suffragette as a 'terrorist', most would accept that the actions of the militants could be viewed as a form of political extremism. The press used the same language to describe the actions of Irish Republicans in the late 19th century as they did for the suffragette attacks of the early 20th. Both were referred to as 'Outrages', actions that disturbed and terrorised their own societies. If contemporary society judged the actions of the militant suffragettes to be equal to those of groups such as Irish Republicans, whose historical identity has become central to discussions of terrorism, why should we continue to ignore or lessen the nature of their violence? All violent acts of militant suffrage can be viewed as acts of terror. They were specifically designed to influence the government and the wider public to change their opinions on women's suffrage, not by reason, but by threats of violence. These threats were then carried out and ranged from window breaking to the destruction of communications (post-box burning, telegraph and telephone wires being cut); the damage of culturally significant objects (paintings in national galleries, statues covered in tar, glass boxes

smashed in the Jewel House of the Tower of London); and arson attacks on theatres, MP's houses and sporting pavilions. At the more extreme end, bombs and incendiary devices were placed in and outside of banks, churches and even Westminster Abbey. All of these acts were carried out against the backdrop of women chaining themselves to railings, rushing the doors of Parliament, refusing to pay taxes and marching in their thousands against a government which had refused to listen to their petitions or to take them seriously.

Daily Mirror cartoonist W.K. Haselden comments on the early violence of suffragettes, July 2nd, 1909. Courtesy the British Cartoon Archive

So what constituted a 'Suffragette Outrage'? One of the earliest recordings of this term came from the *Morpeth Herald*, of November 20th, 1909, when Theresa Garnett (reported internationally as Gurnett) attacked a young Winston Churchill with a horse whip on the platform of Bristol railway station. In the same month Selina Martin and Leslie Hall disguised themselves as orange sellers and, armed with a catapult and missiles, attacked the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's car in Liverpool. The following year, one of the first instances of a suffragette causing physical harm to a member of the public is recorded in Battersea: a clerk suffered burns as he attempted to stop a suffragette from throwing an undefined liquid over the papers of a Member of Parliament.

Risk or injury to the public has been vehemently denied by those who would safeguard the memory of the suffragettes, but the newspapers (and even the accounts of the militant suffragettes themselves) prove that there were numerous instances where injuries occurred and in which personal risk, even the possibility of death, was great. One of the most horrifying suffragette attacks occurred in Dublin in 1912. Mary Leigh, Gladys Evans, Lizzie Baker and Mabel Capper attempted to set fire to the Theatre Royal during a packed lunchtime matinee attended by Asquith. They left a canister of gunpowder close to the stage and hurled petrol and lit matches into the projection booth, which contained highly combustible film reels. Earlier in the day, Mary Leigh had hurled a hatchet towards Asquith, which narrowly missed him and instead cut the Irish Nationalist MP John Redmond on the ear. Redmond's focus on the campaign for Home Rule had led to his refusal to insert a clause giving women the vote, assuring his status as a target.





Police survey Saunderton Railway Station after a suffragette arson attack, March 9th, 1913. Press Association Images

The year 1912 saw an ever increasing escalation of violence among militant suffragettes. Glasgow Art Gallery had its glass cases smashed; bank and post office windows were smashed from Kew to Gateshead; in September, 23 trunk telegraph wires were cut on the London Road at Potters Bar and on November 28th simultaneous attacks on post boxes occurred across the entire country. By the end of the year, 240 people had been sent to prison for militant suffragette activities. The newspapers began to carry weekly round-ups of the attacks, with the *Gloucester Journal* and the *Liverpool Echo* running dedicated columns to report on the latest outrages. In early 1913 a suffragette attacked the glass cabinets in the Tower of London's Jewel House, while in Dundee, four postmen were severely injured by phosphorus chemicals left in post boxes. In Dumbarton 20 telegraph wires were cut; Kew Gardens orchid house was attacked and its tea house burnt down. In Ilford, three streets had their fire alarm wires broken and in Saunderton the railway station was destroyed, while placards entitled 'Votes for Women' and 'Burning For the Vote' were left in prominent positions. Croxley Station near Watford also suffered a similar fate, although the attack was initially not attributed to the militants until a suffragette newspaper was delivered to the station master with the scribbled inscription: 'Afraid copy left got burnt.' Kitty Marion was also continuing her own attacks, such as the one which saw a train, left standing between Hampton Wick and Teddington, almost totally destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday April 26th:

The train was afterwards driven into Teddington Station, where an examination resulted in the discovery of inflammable materials in almost every set of coaches. Among the articles found in the train were partly-burnt candles, four cans of petroleum, three of which had been emptied of their contents, a lady's dressing case containing a quantity of cotton wool, and packages of literature dealing with the woman suffrage movement. Newspaper cuttings of recent suffragette outrages were also found scattered about the train ... The method adopted was very simple. First the cushions were saturated with petroleum, and then small pieces of candle were lighted immediately under the seats.

Marion's personal scrapbook contains references to the burning of these railway carriages and, if we believe that she kept this as record of her own attacks, it would indicate she had a hand in the destruction. Her cross-country knowledge, brought about by her lifestyle as a touring music hall artist, allowed her to locate sites of cultural importance that could be used as targets by the militant suffragettes.

Were these attacks carried out by a large and disjointed group of suffrage supporters operating individually or by a small group of close-knit militant activists? A recent study from the sociology department at the University of Manchester has uncovered some surprising evidence. During the period 1906-14 there were 1,214 court appearances by suffragette activists, yet the majority of those had only ever appeared before the judge for suffrage related crimes once before. This would suggest that the theory of large-scale militant activity carried out by only a handful of dedicated women is unlikely.



Kitty Marion is arrested after heckling Lloyd George at the Royal National Eisteddfod, Wrexham, September 5th, 1912. Museum of London

Yet there is also evidence that multiple attacks were carried out by single perpetrators. Kitty Marion's hand is evident in attacks from Manchester to Portsmouth; the scope of her attacks overlays neatly into areas she had become well acquainted with during her music hall and theatrical days, which afforded her the luxury of an already established network of lodging houses and local knowledge, allowing her to visit areas and conduct militant activity.

Women operating in local areas could also become sources of serious violence. Olive Hocken appeared before magistrates on March 28th, 1913, charged with an arson attack on Roehampton Golf Club's Pavilion, Kew Garden's Orchid House, the cutting of telegraph and telephone wires and the destruction of letters. Her notoriety reached the United States, with the *Boston Herald* carrying a report of her trial and claiming her home in Kensington was a 'depot where people foregathered, armed and prepared for any particular marauding outrage on hand'.

Satirical postcard showing a suffragette in costume, c.1913. Mary Evans Picture Library

Suffragette violence reached its height in the spring and summer of 1913. In May a bomb had been found outside the Bank of England and bowling greens and racecourses were targets for arson and destruction. When the Men's League for Women's Suffrage met in Hyde Park it was heckled by a crowd shouting 'go home and make bombs' and 'who put the bomb in St Pauls?'. In retaliation to the violence, the government targeted the one organisation that it believed to be responsible for encouraging the violent women. The WSPU was banned from holding open-air meetings, as letters from the leadership were often found among the belongings of those on trial. The militants hit back and a number of prominent society members who opposed suffrage saw their homes destroyed by fire and incendiary devices. Statues were disfigured and museums, churches and stately homes were forced to close to the public for fear that they may become the latest target. The methods of attack also seem to have evolved, as shown by the reports surrounding a bomb left on May 21st at the Royal Astronomical Observatory on Blackford Hill, Edinburgh:

The scheme had been well thought-out. On gaining an entrance the perpetrators had taken the bomb to the top of the spiral stairway under the dome and carried a fuse thirty feet long down into the chronograph-room, where it was fired by means of a lighted candle, the remains of which were found. The quantity of gunpowder used must have been considerable, as fragments of the earthen jar which held it were embedded in the wall and woodwork, and the glass of two windows was blown out and carried a considerable distance. A bag, some biscuits, and Suffragette literature were left behind.



The following month, on June 4th, Emily Wilding Davison died after falling under the hooves of the king's horse at the Epsom Derby. Her death triggered responses from all sides of the suffragette movement, but the most violent reaction came from Kitty Marion, who, along with her companion Clara Givens, burned down the pavilion at Hurst Park Racecourse after learning of this 'Supreme Sacrifice'. It led to her subsequent arrest and imprisonment. Kitty now became a martyr to the cause: church services were disturbed by shouts in support of her freedom and a bomb discovered at the Lyceum Theatre, Taunton, was revealed in the press to have the words 'Votes for Women', 'Judges Beware', 'Martyrs of the law' and 'Release our Sisters' painted on its sides.

In 1914 the continued destruction of homes, pavilions and churches abated a little, though it still saw Mary Richardson slash Velázquez's Rokeby Venus in London's National Gallery, amid other examples of cultural violence: the British Museum had mummy cases damaged and bombs were discovered in Westminster Abbey and the Metropolitan Tabernacle; in the latter a postcard was placed bearing the words 'Put your religion into practice and give the women freedom'.

Although attacks on buildings and communication or travel networks saw limited risks to the British public, there were some attacks that would have caused severe individual harm, if they had been successful. In 1913 the plot to kidnap the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, was discussed both in the press and in the House of Commons, as the suffragettes were reported to be contemplating kidnapping one or more Cabinet ministers and subjecting them to force-feeding. The threat was taken so seriously that, for their own protection, private detectives began to shadow the ministers.

The women involved were given many different names in the press from 'wreckers' to 'wild women' and 'professional petroleuse', a language which conjures up images of women resembling the daughters of the French Revolution: a subjugated social group bent on political representation, brandishing the colours of the WSPU and shouting out an anglicised war cry reminiscent of 'Liberté, Unité, Égalité'. The suffragettes were, in many ways, an evolution of the social revolutionary spirit that had been sweeping Europe since the 18th century and their use of the public, masculine language of war, combined with violent actions is worthy of greater historical analysis.

The Daily Mirror

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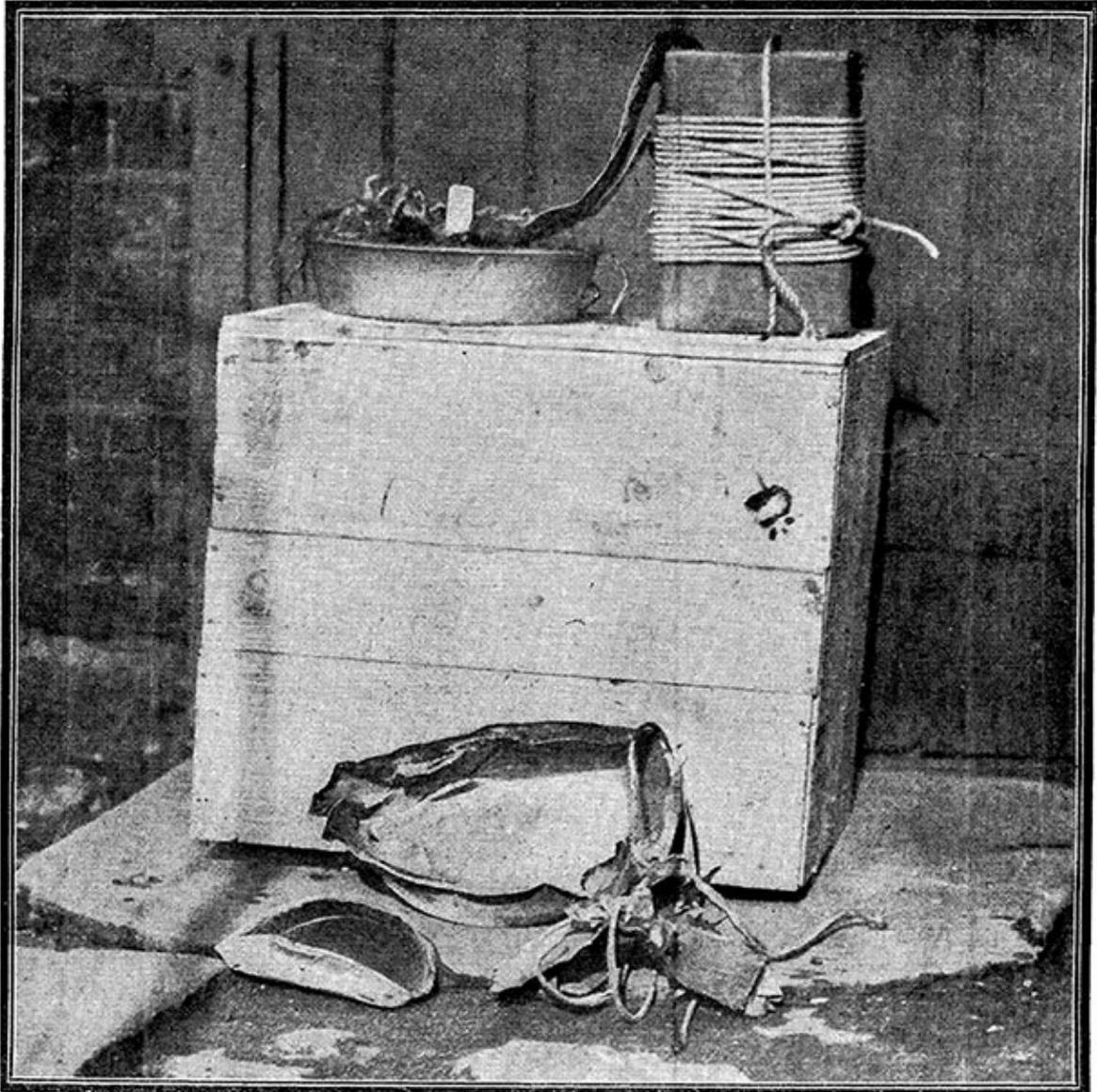
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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1913

One Halfpenny.

THE LATEST POLITICAL ARGUMENT: MR. LLOYD GEORGE'S NEW COUNTRY HOUSE WRECKED BY A BOMB.



An extraordinary outrage was perpetrated yesterday at Mr. Lloyd George's new country house adjoining Walton Heath golf course, a bomb exploding in one of the bedrooms, wrecking the whole of the upper floor. A second bomb failed to explode. Two harpins were found on the premises, and the general opinion is that it is the work of suffragettes. It is supposed to be the latest "argument" in favour of votes for women, and is summed up by "General" Mrs. Drummond, the well-

known militant suffragette, as "grand." The photograph shows all that remains of the bomb which exploded lying on the floor. On the packing-case is the infernal machine which failed to go off tied round with rope. The knot is that of a woman. The fuse leads into a bucket of shavings, in which is a candle. This, presumably, was blown out by the force of the explosion of the other bomb. Other photographs appear on pages 6 and 9.—(Daily Mirror photographs.)

One of two bombs discovered in Lloyd George's cottage, February 20th, 1913. Mirrorpix

When a bomb was discovered in the home of Lloyd George, Mrs Pankhurst quickly claimed 'the moral responsibility for it as one of the leaders who are preaching the suffrage war'. Her daughter, recovering from illness in France at the time of the reports, proclaimed:

Perhaps the Government will realise now that we mean to fight to the bitter end ... If men use explosives and bombs for their own purpose they call it war, and the throwing of a bomb that destroys other people is then described as a glorious and heroic deed. Why should a woman not make use of the same weapons as men. It is not only war we have declared. We are fighting for a revolution.

Such words demonstrate that the WSPU was publically pronouncing in favour of violence. Reading Christabel Pankhurst, it is difficult to understand why it is that the powers of these words, and their influence on readers, have been forgotten. Why has their impact been diminished by time? If the speaker had been a male protagonist, would historians have hesitated to describe the militants as terrorists?

The use of imagery and rhetoric – from the uniforms adopted by the WSPU, to the language used to discuss militancy – suggest that the women fully recognised that their actions in pursuit of political change were illegal, dangerous and life-threatening. This is certainly evident with the formation in 1913 of what became known as 'Mrs Pankhurst's Army':

A meeting was held at Bow, London, last night, for the purposes of inaugurating the projected suffragette 'army', to be known as the People's Training Corps. About 300 persons assembled, mostly young girls and women ... Miss Emerson, in an address, said that their intention was to train the corps that they could proceed in force to Downing Street, and there imprison Ministers until they conceded women's suffrage. They had all heard of bloody Sidney Street, but the bloody scenes that might be expected at Downing Street would be worse.



St Catherine's Church, Hatcham, engulfed in flames after a suffragette arson attack, May 14th, 1913. Mary Evans Picture Library

The identification of the women as warriors or soldiers engaged in domestic warfare was not a new one. Since the early 1900s Mrs Flora Drummond was known to both the press and the WSPU as 'the General' and on one occasion was seen riding on horseback ahead of a procession of over 2,000 suffragists, while the marching song 'The Women's Marseillaise' played behind her. The WSPU had become a beacon of militancy, with a clearly defined brand of female empowerment, employing the rhetoric of war and danger. The violent women of the militant movement occupied the same space as men, they demanded equality and used codes previously attributed to masculine identification; honour, war, duty, respect. But the violent women of the militant movement have been largely forgotten. In the aftermath of the horrors of the First World War the suffragette movement as a whole sought to distance itself from the actions of its most dedicated agents. These have been marginalised, ignored and dismissed for decades.

Turning to the autobiography of Kitty Marion we find her justification for her actions – and those of others:

I was becoming more and more disgusted with the struggle for existence on commercial terms of sex ... I gritted my teeth and determined that somehow I would fight this vile, economic and sex domination over women which had no right to be, and which no man or woman worthy of the term should tolerate.

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