

## INTRODUCTION

### Women's Public Voice and Political Agency: Rethinking the Representation of the People Act 1918

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This special issue of *Caliban* is the outcome of a conference, held in May 2018 at the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès, which invited scholars to reassess the discourses, controversies, and socio-political movements that prepared and followed the voting of the Representation of the People Act 1918. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Act which secured the principle of female suffrage in Britain, contributors sought to explore the diverse ways in which women's political status and citizenship were negotiated and theorized. Exploring a wide array of often understudied sources from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present, the original essays included in this volume testify to the rich polyphony and vital complexity of the history of feminism, and to the difficulties inherent in the making and memorializing of such a history.

The passage of the Suffrage Bill of 1918 was the culmination of a long-fought battle for women's political participation. In the eighteenth century, radical philosophers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, in Britain, and Olympe de Gouges, in France, had fought to redress social inequalities and advance women's political rights. A few decades later, the 1832, 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts introduced wide-ranging changes to the electoral system in Britain, and organized campaigns for female suffrage began to appear in 1866, with John Stuart Mill's presentation of the first mass women's suffrage

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petition to the House of Commons. In an incisive essay published in *Fraser's Magazine* in December 1868, Frances Power Cobbe protested against a system which put women's civil and political rights on a par with those of "Criminals, Idiots, [...] and Minors". She pointedly asked:

To a woman herself who is aware that she has never committed a Crime; who fondly believes that she is not an Idiot; and who is alas! only too sure that she is no longer a Minor [...], the question presses, Ought Englishwomen of full age, at the present state of affairs, to be considered as having legally attained majority? Or ought they permanently to be considered, for all civil and political purposes, as minors?" (Cobbe 110)

Although the term "feminism" only started being used in English in the 1890s, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) paved the way for the intensification of the movement for women's voting rights at the turn of the twentieth century. Considering women's political rights in connection with other rights—to education, employment, property, and divorce—they contributed to the birth of the so-called "first wave" of feminism. British suffragists, however, had to wait until 1918 for a fourth Reform Act to extend the franchise to women. This was almost a century after the first "Great" Reform Act of 1832 had officially and effectively excluded them from suffrage. Interestingly, even then, the Act of 1918 was considered a partial, unsatisfactory piece of legislation. Indeed, granting enfranchisement to all men over 21 but only some women, the law still discriminated between different groups of women, depending on class, age, and marital status.<sup>1</sup> It was not until 1928 that a Conservative government passed the "Equal Franchise Act" which gave the vote to all women over the age of 21 on equal terms with men.

However, there is no doubt that February 1918 marked a watershed moment in the history of women. This momentous event was movingly captured by suffragist Evelyn Sharp in her autobiography. Even though

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Muggeridge explains: "There were a number of different ways a woman could qualify for the franchise once she had reached 30. If she was a property owner, or paid local rates, she could become enfranchised, and if she was married to a man who was a property owner or local rate payer, she would also qualify—although it is worth noting that, if her husband was too poor to afford local rates payments, he would still qualify to vote even though his wife would not." (Muggeridge n.p.)

Sharp was one of those women who was not going to benefit from the new law, she wrote:

I think almost the happiest moment in my life was that in which I walked away up Whitehall [...] on the evening of February 6, 1918, when the Reform Bill received the Royal Assent. To live to see the triumph of a "lost" cause for which we have suffered much and would have sacrificed everything, must be the greatest of human delights. That delight was mine as memories crowded into my mind, of women who had been insulted and rolled in the mud, just there, for attempting to enter the House of Commons and present their petition; memories of years of effort diverted from other causes and other interests, of friends lost by the war and friends gained in the struggle, of horrid disillusionment and transfiguring revelation; memories that hurt so much that they had to be buried out of sight, and memories so illumined by fine behaviour and delicious humour that they would remain a precious possession until the end of life. (169-70)

Over the following decades, women's participation in public life and in the political arena slowly increased, arguably reaching an important turning point in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher was appointed Britain's first female Prime Minister. This had been the most cherished dream of early suffragist Florence C. Dixie. In her feminist utopia, *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890), Dixie had dramatized the rise to power of an elected female Premier: "I do not see that we should be a wit less badly governed if we had a woman Prime Minister or a mixed Cabinet, or if women occupied seats in the Houses of Parliament or on the bench in the Courts of Justice," she commented (Dixie 26). But how is this trajectory viewed and assessed today?

The articles included in this *Caliban* issue are arranged in chronological order. They take us from post-revolutionary utopian discourse in the early nineteenth century to the biopolitics of the suffragettes' militant tactics; from early twentieth-century suffragist theatre to anti-suffragist discourse in male and female popular fiction; and from the "New Woman" and first-wave feminists to their problematic legacy for second-wave feminism. The volume concludes with a historical and historiographical reflection on the cultural significance of some of the commemorations of the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage organized in Britain throughout 2018.

In her opening essay, Alexandra Sippel focuses on one of the early advocates of women's suffrage: the early Socialist John Minter Morgan (1782-1854). A friend of the philanthropist Robert Owen and the economist

William Thompson, Morgan popularized and expanded some of their ideas in his utopian fiction. In particular, he was a fervent supporter of a cooperative model society who promoted gender equality as a central tenet of his ideal social model. As an historian of ideas, Sippel analyzes Morgan's novel *Hampden in the Nineteenth Century* (1834) with a view to assessing his role in the long line of radical, socialist, and utilitarian thinkers who defended the feminist cause at the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century.

At the close of the Victorian era, however, anti-feminist rhetoric became more strident as the term "New Woman" was ubiquitously deployed as a derisive label in the press, the arts, and literature, turning female activists into scapegoats for a wide range of social anxieties. Some of William Somerset Maugham's early short fiction, analyzed in Francesca Massarenti's essay, looks at the evolving role of women at the turn of the century. Massarenti shows that through his careful narrative and stylistic choices, the author manages to deflect *fin-de-siècle* suspicion towards the "New Woman", promote female self-expression and creativity, and convey a sympathetic view of women's capabilities as legitimate cultural and political agents.

In the early years of the twentieth century, despite decades of relentless campaigns, political and social citizenship still seemed out of reach for many female suffragists who had engaged in the fight. The various arguments used to justify women's exclusion from the political sphere continued to be dominated by the equality-difference debate, the public-private role of women, and the significance of sexual and biological characteristics. The suffrage movement itself was not impervious to such discussions and dissensions, and the issue of voting rights polarized different factions within the nascent feminist movement. As Jane Freedman reminds us in *Feminism* (2001), suffrage was not a unifying women's issue.

The conflicted arguments surrounding the question of female suffrage at the beginning of the twentieth century are explored in illuminating ways by two essays in this volume which focus on anti-suffragist fiction. Philippe Birgy's study of H. G. Wells' late New Woman novel, *Ann Veronica* (1909), analyzes the biological bias of the author's defense of sexual equality. But Birgy also shows that Wells's masculine prejudices are not exempt from sympathy for the suffragists; and that one of the merits of *Ann Veronica* lies in its ability to represent the competing political discourses—Fabian, socialist, feminist, liberal—which both fascinate and confuse Wells's assertive young heroine. Similarly, Lauren Sperandio Phelps's essay discusses the interactions between various strands of (anti-) feminist

discourses through her examination of Mary Augusta Ward's anti-suffrage novel, *Delia Blanchflower* (1914). Best remembered today as the founding president of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, Ward was also a well-known progressive social reformer who promoted women's advancement. Using Ward's personal notes and letters, as well as the manuscripts and publishers' proofs for *Delia Blanchflower*, Sperandio Phelps scrutinizes Ward's complex politics in order to reassess conservative women's contribution to early feminism and suffrage discourse.

Among the pro-suffragists too, major discrepancies emerged. Building on Mary Wollestonecraft's legacy, some activists saw suffrage as a human rights issue. Others, by contrast, made suffrage the cornerstone of women's fight for equality, arguing that gender hierarchies and male domination in society would continue to exist as long as women were not granted full political citizenship. Twentieth-century suffragists also diverged in their chosen methods, with Millicent Garrett Fawcett's National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) favouring conciliatory campaigning methods, while the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) adopted increasingly militant tactics, demanding "deeds, not words" in their 1905 motto. Sandra Stanley Holton contends that the differences between Fawcett's and Pankhurst's approaches reveal the "tensions within modern European thought between the 'classical' and the 'romantic' world view" (Stanley Holton 11). If these divergent visions and methods illustrate the long and complex history of women's movements, commentators generally agree that the fight to enter the political arena was the hallmark of the political identity of the first generation of feminists.

In their bid for full political citizenship, the suffragettes went down in history for the many, often dramatic forms of protests they staged and for the violent treatment they endured at the hands of government authorities. Perhaps lesser known are some of the strategies they employed to fight back. Alice Bonzom's essay analyzes the WSPU's promotion of the martial art of jujitsu, both as a self-defense technique against policemen and as a form of empowerment. Bonzom thus explores the tensions inherent in the suffragettes' tactics as well as changing Edwardian attitudes towards women's bodies. Using Home Office archives, prison records, and contemporary press accounts, she also examines the strategies devised by government and prison officials to contain and discipline women's bodies, as well as some of the WSPU members' counter-attacks.

As female suffragists developed a clearer sense of their strength and purpose as a collective body, it became more imperative to consolidate and celebrate female solidarity and to *re-present* female history. A case in point

is suffrage theatre—which has lately been rediscovered and is now recognized as constituting the first wave of feminist drama. As Eleanor Stewart’s essay powerfully demonstrates, suffrage plays of the 1910s emphasized the idea of the collective and vividly reflected the political campaign itself, by showing rally scenes, political speeches, women on strikes, and spectacular parades on stage. In her meticulous study of Cicely Hamilton’s *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909) and Christopher St. John’s *The First Actress* (1911), Stewart also shows that the shift from the individual to the collective was effected through the making and performing of a feminist historiography. Using theatrical forms such as the pageant or the morality play, Hamilton and St. John brought to the stage illustrious women from the past, in order to create a sense of trans-historic female community and establish women’s agency as history-makers. In the context of the suffrage campaign, performing the past became a compelling way of legitimizing a collective trajectory and gesturing towards a brighter future.

In the years that followed the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918, most commentators acknowledge that women’s status was not dramatically improved. But the opening up of representative institutions to women offered the promise of new possibilities. In subsequent decades, the modern woman would obtain more political, social, and economic rights. If women’s inclusion in politics can be conceived as part of what Ruth Lister calls the “broad liberal tradition of citizenship” (34), it is also first and foremost an expression of human agency and self-development. In that respect, the 1960s and 1970s were crucial years for the voicing of women’s aspirations, with the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement which quickly gained prominence and bolstered women’s role and place in society.

And yet, the grassroots libertarian WLM had an uneasy relationship to the early twentieth-century suffragists, as Julie Sauvage’s insightful essay explains. Looking at the 1970s feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, Sauvage shows how the memory, significance, and legacy of the suffrage movement were mediated and, to a certain extent, recalibrated. In 1978, the anniversary of women’s suffrage provided the *Spare Rib* editorial team with an opportunity to engage with the history of feminism and produce *de facto* a new interpretation of the suffrage movement in the light of the liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Basic editorial decisions were predicated on strategic political choices about which events and figures to commemorate or which images, symbols, texts and testimonies to include. Interestingly, as with the recent 2018 anniversary of women’s suffrage, analyzed in Julie Gottlieb’s next essay, the commemorations of *Spare Rib* in

1978 were inflected by questions that were not necessarily connected with the issue of suffrage. Examining the significance of the Representation of the People Act 1918 at age 60 and age 100 thus leads Sauvage and Gottlieb to ponder the uses and limitations of enfranchisement for accessing full citizenship.

In the UK, 2018 was marked by various festivities and cultural events, such as the unveiling of Gillian Wearing's memorial to Millicent Garrett Fawcett in Parliament Square, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. However the choice of Fawcett sparked vigorous debate. In the concluding essay of this volume, historian Julie Gottlieb reexamines the role and activities of Fawcett in the franchise movement and carefully justifies the selection of Fawcett and of the other leading suffragists displayed on the plinth of the statue. Reflecting on the several anniversaries of the 1918 Act which have taken place in the past, Gottlieb reminds us that such commemorations function to "inspire, motivate and establish a particular narrative in the history of women's rights". Looking back at the role she played as a historical adviser to artist Gillian Wearing and as a "participant historian", Gottlieb assesses her own contribution to this anniversary, but she also considers more broadly the significance of women's social position at different periods during the twentieth century. She invites readers to reevaluate past achievements through the prism of current women's rights movements—such as #MeToo—and ponder over the role of the 2018 anniversary to inspire new generations of feminists.

One easy way of looking at the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918 might be to interpret this event as the final, successful stage in the suffragists' fight. But the historical prominence of the 1918 statute ought to be gauged also in light of the subsequent achievements that have permitted women's citizenship to develop. More crucially, the anniversary of the Act of 1918 invites all citizens—not just scholars—to pause and reflect on the meaning of access to citizenship as a process, and not simply as an outcome. If agency is central to citizenship, then women's citizenship in twenty-first century Britain will necessitate to extend, defend and give more substance to the political, civil and social rights of citizenship. Women's autonomy and authority are still constantly under threat and many challenges remain: in education and culture; in the sexual and reproductive domains; in the labour market; in women's formal political representation and agency. These are but a few of the existing and forthcoming battles.

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