

‘NO. I DON’T WANT A VOTE.  
I WANT TO HAVE ONE AND NOT USE IT.’

*Lottie Whalen*

Jane Robinson, *Hearts and Minds: The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote* (London: Doubleday, 2018) pp.400 ISBN 9780857523914

How many of these peaceful, rational suffragists would face prison, face forcible feeding through a clumsily, agonizingly mutilated nostril? Would I? Have I the right to speak for the militants?<sup>1</sup>

Dorothy Richardson’s experiences amongst the lively intellectual circles of 1900s London fed in to the development of the singular aesthetic and political sensibilities that mark her out as one of modernism most fascinating feminist writers. The years she spent associating with Dora Marsden, H. G. Wells, Fabian, and anarchist circles coincided with a marked escalation in tension and action among the various organisations that made up the Votes for Women campaign.<sup>2</sup> The years 1907-1908 saw several mass marches descend on London, and the start of the militant campaign, followed, in July 1909, by the first hunger strike by imprisoned suffragette Marion Wallace Dunlop.

Surprisingly few contemporaneous modernist novels represent the Votes for Women campaign in detail, although certain notable exceptions come from Richardson’s circle: H. G. Wells’s *Ann Veronica* (1909) and May Sinclair’s 1917 novel *Tree of Life*. It wasn’t until 1935 that Richardson wrote *Clear Horizon* (the eleventh chapter-volume in the *Pilgrimage* series), the novel in which she revisits and revises Wells’s *Ann Veronica* and reflects on the period of the suffragette agitation in the turbulent period between 1907 and 1908.<sup>3</sup> By this point, Richardson had long since eschewed the

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, vol. 4 (London: Virago Press, 1979), 483.

<sup>2</sup> Marsden was a suffragette until 1911, when she began to denounce Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst in her journal the *Freevoman*.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed exploration of the relationship between the two texts, see: Howard Finn, ‘Modernism and Suffragette Prison Narratives’, *Key Words*, no. 3 (2000): 94–108.

suffragettes' commitment to militancy, martyrdom, and what increasingly seemed to be a myopic attitude towards the vote. Like the rest of Marsden's *Freewomen* milieu, Richardson was increasingly drawn to a form of Nietzschean individualism; indeed, her personal political trajectory aligned with the transition from *The Freewoman* (1911 – 1912) to *The New Freewoman* (1913) and then finally *The Egoist* (1914-1918).

As Richardson completed the first of her thirteen-volume novel *Pilgrimage* in 1913, a different sort of pilgrimage was underway across the towns and cities of England. Known as The Great Pilgrimage, this national mass march across England and Wales was coordinated by Millicent Garrett Fawcett's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Driven as much by frustration at the divisive militant action of the Women's Social and Political Union's suffragettes as by the lack of progress in the fight for women's suffrage, huge groups of suffragists travelled along six main routes that converged on 26 July 1913 in a rally in London's Hyde Park. The Great Pilgrimage was a strictly peaceful affair made up of women from all walks of life. Those that could not afford to leave work or their families joined in for a section of the route, but many others made the entire journey and formed part of the more than fifty thousand strong crowd that descended on London in that final peaceful summer before the First World War. It was an opportunity to demonstrate that the majority of women in favour of the vote were civilised, law-abiding citizens, and to thereby reclaim the cause from the window-smashing, painting-slashing suffragettes. Jane Robinson's *Hearts and Minds: the Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote* has a similar aim. By recovering the story of the Great Pilgrimage, Robinson argues that the eventual success of the Votes for Women movement was down to the peaceful persistence of the decorous, 'ladylike' suffragists, rather than the radical action of the Pankhurst family and their militant suffragette followers (8).

Robinson paints a vivid picture of a fascinating overlooked chapter in feminist history. The levels of organisation, commitment and bravery shown by the pilgrims is remarkable. Facing all weather, women young and old travelled by bicycle, on foot, or in caravans. On route, they battled frequent brutal attacks from angry townspeople and 'mercenary ruffians' hired by anti-suffrage groups. The study is carefully researched, examining diaries, government documents and NUWSS records to reveal not only the many challenges and setbacks that the marchers faced, but also lighter

moments of camaraderie and humour (such as pilgrim Cicely Leadley Brown fixing the broken-down car of a group of anti-suffragist male hecklers). In the process, she uncovers an eclectic cast of little-known characters whose efforts were less attention-grabbing than the dramatic acts of violence and suffering performed by the suffragettes, but vital to the everyday running of the movement. *Hearts and Minds* introduces the reader to women such as the Hull-based physician Dr Mary Murdoch, a flamboyant figure who tirelessly campaigned for enfranchisement in working-class communities, and Kate Frye, a witty diarist who chronicled her exhausting, often-mundane administrative work. It is a dramatic story, though, at times, the narrative is a little unwieldy and Robinson struggles to keep a grip on the many shifts in direction, dynamics and strategy within both the WSPU and NUWSS.

It is also striking that for all Robinson strives to attribute the eventual achievement of women's suffrage to the suffragists, she cannot write their story without also writing that of the suffragettes. *Hearts and Minds* frequently echoes the suffragists' disgust at their suffragette sisters' actions, but it is hard not to empathise with the latter's rage. Robinson's inclusions of Herbert Asquith's and David Lloyd George's repeated prevarications and obstructions offer a sense of just how infuriatingly impossible suffrage must have seemed to women at the time. Occasionally the revisionist agenda at work in *Hearts and Minds* seems forced, and leads Robinson to make some problematic criticisms of the Pankhursts and the WSPU: in a particularly troubling example, she offers the claim that the 'earthier' Emmeline Pankhurst 'has been described as being like a mistress, Millicent [Garrett Fawcett] like a wife', without any reflection on the wider implications of the language used (43). Indeed, perhaps the major flaw of *Hearts and Minds* is that in focusing on the battle between the peaceful suffragists and militant suffragettes, it rehearses familiar stereotypes that surround the two groups.

Robinson's references to each movement's less conventional characters gloss over disruptive details. For example, she fails to mention Dr Murdoch's turn from the NUWSS to the WSPU in 1909, because of the former's censure of suffragette militant action: despite her reservations about the autocratic Pankhursts and their increasing militancy, Dr Murdoch proclaimed she would not 'condemn [the suffragettes] in public, even if death comes' and switched her allegiances. Although Dr Murdoch remained friends with Garret Fawcett, the loss of such an active

campaigner who wielded great influence in her working-class community must have been a blow to the group; further, it demonstrates how conflicted even moderate, non-militant figures felt as the divisions between the NUWSS and WSPU deepened.<sup>4</sup> Robinson's claim that the WSPU were 'mightily proud' of Dora Marsden is also odd, considering that Marsden turned against the group in 1911 and began attacking them in the *Freewoman* (126).<sup>5</sup> The internal struggle between radicalism and conservatism within the National Society for Women's Suffrage (the precursor of the NUWSS) is similarly dismissed as a difference of opinion that was easily resolved by Garrett Fawcett's canny political game of 'Grandmother's Footsteps' (43). In fact, the split between Radical Suffragists such as Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and conservative leadership figures such as Lydia Becker and Garrett Fawcett was a pivotal moment in the formation and direction of the NUWSS, as well as a milestone in the conflicted, contradictory history of the wider movement.<sup>6</sup> By reducing the struggle for the vote as a matter of militant suffragette versus mild-mannered suffragist, *Hearts and Minds* does little to defend the suffrage movement from the charge made by Marsden in her inaugural editorial for *The Freewoman* (1911) that it represented an 'unthought-out and nebulous feminism', lacking in a broader moral or political vision and constrained by dictatorial leaders.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Miriam Henderson's own contradictory, ambivalent attitude towards women's suffrage offers the nuance that many contemporary popular histories lack. Echoing Marsden's sentiment that the vote, whilst not insignificant, was an over-valued part of women's struggle for autonomy, Miriam declares in *Revolving Lights* (1923) 'No. I don't want a vote. I want to have one and not use it'

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<sup>4</sup> Hope Malleon, *A Woman Doctor: Mary Murdoch of Hull* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1919), 61

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: a Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: Routledge, 2001), 431.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton offers a fascinating insight into Wolstenholme Elmy's role in the movement, and the 'differing conceptions of women's citizenship, and of strategies to achieve it' that divided the National Society for Women's Suffrage, see *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Dora Marsden, 'Notes of the Week', *Freewoman* 1, no. 1 (23 November 1911): 3.

(III 394). As she grows into a smoking, bicycle-riding, self-declared 'New Woman', Miriam develops an independent feminist consciousness that is intensely critical of the patriarchal social structures that she believes both men *and* women uphold. The freedom that she seeks is far beyond the political system and, as such, it is no surprise that the self-sacrifice, strictures, and narrow focus of the suffrage groups appealed neither to Richardson nor her protagonist. Histories such as *Hearts and Minds* offer an enjoyable look back on early chapters in feminist history, but it is also vital to consider the position of women like Marsden and Richardson: those who could not find a political home amongst the suffragists *or* the suffragettes. Indeed, as we navigate the future of the feminist movement in our own increasingly polarised, politically fraught times, we must heed Marsden's caution to not lose sight of the moral and political complexities of the 'whole feminist question'.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, the episodes covered in *Clear Horizon* offer a fascinating perspective on the suffrage movement, despite (or perhaps because of) the intervening decades. This chapter-volume is set in 1907, a year before the publication of H.G. Wells' scandalous 'New Woman' novel *Ann Veronica*, which features an eponymous suffragette heroine ostensibly based on Wells' young lover Amber Reeves; however, readers of *Pilgrimage* cannot fail to be struck by the similarities between events in *Ann Veronica* and the Hypo-Miriam-Amabel sections of *Clear Horizon*, as well as certain crossovers between *Ann Veronica*, Richardson, and Veronica Leslie-Jones (the model for Amabel). Yet, where Wells is patronising and dismissive of suffragette psychology, Richardson's interrogates it with uncompromising honesty, as in the scene where Miriam makes an awkward visit to see Amabel in Holloway prison. Miriam struggles to understand Amabel's 'tragic, martyred air' and strange performance of suffering. She finds cannot 'play a suitable part' in this drama, yet she also recognises the ambiguity of her own motives, unsure 'whether she had most wanted to see Amabel or, most, to achieve the experience of visiting an imprisoned suffragist' (IV 359). Although this episode is set in 1907, it is clearly refracted through the later troubled and controversial years of hunger strikes, martyrdom, and, for some, disillusion. For women such as Richardson and Marsden, this disillusion led to the pursuit of an ideology of individualist libertarian feminism. In

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<sup>8</sup> Marsden, 'Notes of the Week', 3.

1913, the year of Emily Wilding Davison's shocking death under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby, Richardson would complete *Pointed Roofs* and Marsden would transform *The New Freewoman* into *The Egoist*, the literary journal that would go on to publish May Sinclair's crucial essay on Richardson and the stream of consciousness. Robinson's study reminds us that the many complex strengths, flaws, and tensions within the mass suffrage movement provided a critical context for Richardson's journey through female consciousness.