



IN PRAISE OF AN EXTREMIST

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Emily Davison *may* be a familiar name to you as the suffragette who threw herself under a horse and who is often dismissed as typical of the ‘lunatic fringe’ of the Women’s Social and Political Union. When *Rebecca Ferguson* was a student at the Royal Holloway College, which Emily herself attended, she was prompted to look into the rest of her story. Emily’s commitment to civil disobedience and direct action symbolizes the militancy in the suffrage campaign that hides behind its more respectable history.

The day after the Derby in 1913, Emily reached the headlines of all the papers. Some even had a photograph of her being thrown to the ground. *The Suffragette* magazine devoted a whole edition, its pages lined with black, to Emily’s life, and to her sacrifice. Women from all over the country travelled to London to take part in her funeral procession. Their feelings are expressed by this passage from *The Suffragette*:
‘In the last gallant rush upon the King’s horse at the Derby, which was

to give all the world the knowledge that a Suffragette, in the full tide of life and energy, had died for her faith, Emily Davison left for her comrades in the fight an ineffaceable impression of a life consecrated to one great end.’

Ineffaceable. That was how Emily’s act was described in 1913. It is strange, then, that Emily is one of the more anonymous heroines of the fight for women’s suffrage. She was a little too militant for the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and so she tended to act by herself. Historians

documenting the Suffrage campaign have found little information about her and so have either excluded her entirely from their accounts or have cast her into strange, very inappropriate roles. She has been described as a statuesque, red-headed beauty, going to her death with an Amazon-like dignity; as a mystic and a visionary who thought she was Joan of Arc; or as an hysterical, even insane woman who did not know what she was doing. The accounts of those who knew her prove each of those pictures wrong.

Emily was born and spent her childhood in Northumberland, where her family remained while she moved away to attend school in Kensington. At school she showed promise and was awarded a scholarship to attend Royal Holloway College, a new women’s college and one of the first in the country. As one of the few women in Britain who had been able to continue their education and study for a degree, Emily must have been very conscious

of her privileged position. Although this was a decade before the Women's Suffrage society was set up at the college, there were plenty of opportunities for Emily to discuss and learn about women's place in society. Despite her father's death she scraped together enough money to continue her studies and passed an English degree with first class honours.

She managed to find a job as a schoolteacher but found it very limiting: she needed more to think about, more action. She began to attend meetings of the WSPU, at first out of curiosity, to see if the newspapers were right to condemn them. With increasing interest she finally joined the Union in 1906 and by 1908 was acting as convenor for a major WSPU demonstration in London, although she had to leave early to return to her pupils. Dissatisfied with such restrictions she changed her position and went to work as governess for a family in Berkshire. Within a year she gave up that job as well, and returned to London to devote her time and energy to the women's movement.

In March 1909, Emily took part in a delegation of women to present their views to the Prime Minister, Mr Asquith. She was arrested for the first time, and sentenced to a month in prison. By the end of July she was free, protesting at a political meeting at which Lloyd George was speaking, and was again arrested and imprisoned. Between March and July imprisoned suffragettes had developed a new means of protest. Classed as Grade Two prisoners they lacked certain privileges enjoyed by Grade One prisoners, such as the right to wear their own clothes. They had demanded to be reclassified and when their demands were ignored they began to protest and take part in hunger strikes. Describing her protest in a determined way, Emily wrote:

'When I was shut in the cell I at once smashed seventeen panes of glass. Please, if you are asked why we did this, say, because we object to the fact that the windows can never be opened and the ventilation is bad.

Then they rushed me to another cell, in which everything was fixed. I broke seven panes of that window, to the matron's astonishment, as I had a hammer . . . Then they forcibly undressed me and left me sitting in a prison chemise. I sang the second verse of "God Save the King" with "Confound their politics" in it!

Emily was locked in a dark cell, and fasted for over five days, losing one and a half stone before she was released. On the walls of Holloway prison she carved some words which were to become her motto: 'Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God.'

She spent August quietly at home

with her mother, recovering from her ordeal in prison. Within a month she was active once again, and was sentenced to two months in jail for breaking windows, but was released after a two day hunger strike.

In October Lloyd George was to speak in Newcastle, and the women's



Emily's funeral

movement organised various protests for the occasion. This time Emily was given a partner to work with, Lady Constance Lytton. Holding stones the two women waited for Lloyd George's car to arrive. As the car drove past Newcastle Breweries they ran forward, aiming to damage the car as much as possible, but not to harm its occupants. Lady Constance threw her stone successfully; Emily, seized and arrested before she could act was tried for attempted assault, but released. Only a fortnight later, she was on her way to Strangeways for breaking windows at the Post Office and at the Liberal Club.

Since the suffragettes had begun hunger striking four months earlier policy within prisons had been changed. The prison authorities had resorted to force-feeding whenever they so chose, despite the fact that this was illegal without the 'patient's' consent. Emily had been on hunger strike since the day she appeared in court. The day after she arrived in the prison two doctors,

the prison matron, and five or six wardresses entered her cell, held her down, and, ignoring her protestations, force fed her. 'The scene which followed', wrote Emily on her release, 'will haunt me with its horror all my life . . . While they held me flat, the elder doctor tried all round my mouth with a steel gag to find an opening. On the right side of my mouth two teeth are missing; this gap he found, pushed in the horrid instrument, and prised open my mouth to its widest extent . . . As I would not swallow the stuff and jerked it out with my tongue, the doctor pinched my nose and somehow gripped my tongue with the gag. The torture was barbaric.'

Two days later Emily was transferred to a neighbouring cell. Never one to give in to circumstances if she could try to alter them, and sickened by her experiences, she realised that she could use the furniture in her room to barricade herself in. Climbing to the top of her barricade, she settled down to wait. All afternoon people hammered on the door, trying to make her give in, determined to gain admittance. Finally they smashed her window, inserted the nozzle of a hose, and turned the jet of icy water directly onto her, until the water level in the room had reached six inches. They would have continued for longer had a group of prison visitors not arrived at that moment and been horrified by what was happening. Emily still refused to move and so, despite the danger to her, they broke the door down. She was carried off to a hot bath, but the caring soon stopped and the doctor returned to force feed her again. This time the tube was passed up one nostril and then pushed down her throat. After that ordeal her strength was almost gone and she was released from prison by the authorities who did not want to have to explain her death.

Her protest had had some effect, mostly because it had been seen by the prison visitors. Questions were asked in the House of Commons about the treatment of imprisoned suffragettes. Emily sued and was awarded 40 shillings in damages and costs, but the treatment of women in prison — which had won the approval of the Secretary of State — was continued. It was clear Parliament was doing nothing to meet the suffragettes' demands. Emily determined to get into the House of Commons to ask Mr ▶

As we go to press, we're thinking especially of the women from Greenham Common Peace Camp, imprisoned for their 'extremism' in opposing the siting of cruise missiles in this country. And of all women in prison in many countries, struggling for a better world.

The Spare Rib Collective

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◀ Asquith why he would not make the House representative by giving the vote to women. On a Saturday afternoon she hid herself in a cubby hole in the heating system of the Houses of Parliament, prepared to sit it out until Monday. Thirst gave the game away. On the Sunday she was caught by a watchman after creeping downstairs for a drink. If she had been tried she would have had to appear before the House of Commons which was, of course, exactly what she wanted. It was decided to drop the case.

The fight for the vote continued. In 1911 large numbers of women made the census an occasion to get their message heard by refusing to complete their forms. 'As I am a woman, and women do not count in the State, I refuse to be counted', Emily wrote on her census paper and alongside this she continued her individual acts of protest and defiance. She made a further attempt to get into the House of Commons which also failed due to discovery. Once again it was against the authorities interests to charge her.

After setting fire to a pillar box in 1912, however, she was sent to prison for six months, and there her health broke down. She was force fed, not because she was on hunger strike, but because she was too weak to eat enough to keep herself alive. When she recovered she joined the other suffragettes in Holloway on hunger strike. They were placed in solitary confinement, and when that did not break their resolve the force feeding began again. They barricaded themselves in their cells and Emily later described the horrible noises as the warders worked their way down the corridor. Crowbars had to be used on the doors, there would be splintering sounds and then there would be the screams of the woman being force fed. Emily put up as strong a fight as anyone, but she too was held down and force fed, for the *fortieth* time.

When they left her cell Emily lay still for a time, horrified by the torture from which the women were suffering. Then she got to her feet, broke her way out of her cell and threw herself down the stairs to land on the wire netting thirty feet below. 'The idea in my mind was "one big tragedy may save others"', she reported afterwards. She was unsuccessful; the wire netting saved her from harm. The wardresses brought her back to the top of the staircase and, as they were remonstrating with her, she ran to the staircase and threw herself down *again*. As the wardresses ran to seize her and drag her back to her cell she realised that her final chance was to throw herself as hard as possible from the netting to the staircase below. Crying, 'No surrender!' she threw herself head

first, with all her might onto the iron staircase ten feet below.

Emily survived this third suicide bid, suffering injuries to her back, head and shoulder which were to trouble her for the rest of her life. She lay on her prison bed in agony, too ill to be moved to the hospital. She was force fed nine times during the next week. During an interview with the prison doctors she convinced them that she was sane and that her suicide bids were considered acts. She tried to convince them of their inhumanity towards the suffragettes, and she certainly persuaded them of her courage. It is these suicide bids and these interviews which prove that her death the next year was not something performed in the heat of the moment, but a considered sacrifice.

Emily began 1913 in a way which had become customary. She lived a precarious existence with no job and no certain income. Her heroic acts and her



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independency meant that she was in some ways detached from the WSPU. She stopped writing her forceful letters to the national newspapers because they refused to print them. She did, however, write numerous articles for *The Suffragette* and for *Votes for Women*. And she continued to be arrested, one time for assaulting a Baptist minister at Aberdeen station whom she had mistaken for Lloyd George, but released again when an anonymous donor paid her fine.

At the beginning of June 1913 Emily went into the WSPU office to ask for a flag. When the staff asked why she wanted it she replied that it was best that no-one should know, but that they would read about it in the papers. Later in the week it was Derby Day and the Epsom race track was lined with people excitedly waiting the outcome of the

big race. Among the crowd were reporters and photographers from all the big national newspapers, various Members of Parliament and the King and Queen. Among them too was Emily Davison, a return ticket to Waterloo in her pocket, a flag in the suffragette colours sewn inside her coat. A woman standing near her later reported that: 'A minute before the race started she raised a paper or some kind of card before her eyes. I was watching her hand. It did not shake. Even when I heard the pounding of the horses' hooves moving closer I saw she was still smiling'.

After the leading horses hurtled past at forty miles an hour Emily quickly ducked under the railings and seized the bridle of the King's colt, Anmer. Horse, rider and Emily fell to the ground in a confused heap in front of the Royal Box. She was carried to the Epsom Cottage Hospital where the Queen enquired about her condition while the King enquired after the jockey. The jockey recovered but Emily did not come out of her coma. Fellow suffragettes watched by her bedside which they draped in green, white and purple. She came round, briefly; said, 'Fight on, and God will give the victory,' and lapsed back into unconsciousness. Her condition deteriorated, an emergency operation was performed, but it failed to save her and she died on June 8.

Tributes arrived from all over Britain and the WSPU arranged her funeral procession with as much care as possible. Mourners were divided into three main categories: those wearing black who were to carry purple irises, those wearing purple to carry red peonies, and those wearing white to carry madonna lilies. Next to the hearse were to walk relatives, hunger strikers and Mrs Pankhurst. Mrs Pankhurst, however, just released from prison under the 'Cat and Mouse Act' was arrested as she left her house to attend the funeral and so an empty carriage took her place. Thousands marched and thousands more looked on in respectful silence at what was the WSPU's last procession to mark the death of its first martyr.

Emily's final protest was consistent with all the acts of militancy she had carried out in the last five years of her life. An article she wrote in May 1913, which was later found among her papers shows that she had been thinking about what to do. In it she establishes a clear connection between her strong religious beliefs and her political beliefs. Its concluding sentences stated: 'To lay down life for friends, that is glorious, inspiring! But to re-enact the tragedy of Calvary for generations yet unborn, that is the last consummate sacrifice of the Militant! Nor will she shrink from this Nirvana. She will be faithful unto this last.' ■

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