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## **'An Articulate and Definite Cry for Political Freedom': the Ulster suffrage movement <sup>[1]</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the development of the Ulster suffrage movement and assesses the impact of the third Irish home rule crisis of 1912-14 on the much lauded, although always tenuous, unity of Irish suffragism. The tensions caused by the decision of Ulster unionists to grant women's suffrage under their plans for a provisional government are considered. In addition to this, the establishment of a branch of the Women's Social and Political Union in Ulster caused serious apertures within the indigenous suffrage movement and put Belfast in the midst of what contemporaries believed to be a 'genuine revolution'. Ultimately, an examination of Ulster suffragism highlights not only the value of conducting local studies in order to capture and understand the complexity of the suffrage movement, but also the difficulties and frustrations which women faced whilst campaigning for the enfranchisement of their own sex.

All women involved in the suffrage movement across Europe and the Americas had different experiences, whilst sharing the same ultimate objective of attaining the right to vote. Differences were caused not only by ideological beliefs regarding the merits of militant or constitutional action, but also by geography. In Ireland, there were rural and urban distinctions and regional differences between the north and south of the country. In addition, the political framework which the women's suffrage movement struggled to influence, and operated within, distanced Irish suffragists from many of their contemporaries. From the late nineteenth century, Irish politics was dominated by the home rule question, and suffragists, therefore, struggled to arouse interest in the campaign for women's enfranchisement. Effectively, the home rule issue alienated many women from joining the Irish suffrage campaign as many perceived Ireland's fate to be of more consequence than votes for women.

It has been argued that 'Past politics ... that most traditional of all forms of history, appears at first glance to be an almost totally male preserve. On the rare occasions when women did actively participate in politics, historians have tended to see them as disruptive'.[2] In terms of the suffrage campaign, this analysis is apt as the militant tenets of the movement deliberately used disorderly tactics in an attempt to counter the inertia of both the political system and the general public. But militancy was very much a last resort, embarked upon by Ulster, Irish and British women alike from a sense of frustration and disillusionment. Indeed, initially the suffrage movement possessed something of an air of gentility. From the nineteenth century, middle-class women of leisured affluence became increasingly involved in philanthropy. This public volunteerism led some Irish and British women to more self-oriented issues, as the campaigns which women conducted in search of property and educational reform could gradually lead to an involvement in the suffrage campaign. Attaining the vote became the key feminist goal of the early twentieth century as women collated the liberal arguments of natural rights and equality to their own enfranchisement.[3]

The suffrage movement was the first sustained political campaign to be conducted by women on their own behalf. Following the 1867 Reform Act's use of the term 'man' to define electoral eligibility, the campaign throughout Britain gained momentum. However, as David Morgan has highlighted, feminism in the 1880s and 1890s 'was still too *avant-garde* ... for the bulk of female activists'.[4] In spite of this marginality, some Irish women were interested in, and actively promoted, suffrage from the middle of the nineteenth century. For instance, there were twenty-five Irish women's signatures on John Stuart Mill's now infamous suffrage petition that was presented to the House of Commons in 1866. Furthermore, in 1872, Isabella Tod, a Belfast woman who was a prominent and informed defender of women's rights, organised a suffrage tour of Ireland which was able to attract audiences of 500 people. During the next year, Tod, as the self-proclaimed 'chief pleader for women's suffrage' in Ulster, established the first suffrage society in Ireland, the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society.[5] Tod's writings also reveal the stirrings of suffragist activity in Ulster at this time:

You know how deep is the conviction of the best women in Ulster ... this claim has reached all parts of the Province, all grades of society, all creeds and classes, that the possession of the franchise ... is an absolute necessity ... it is impossible for women to do their duty, and to protect their interests and dignity, without the same weapon men find essential for the same purposes.[6]

Tod, alongside another pioneering Irish feminist, Anna Haslam, also encouraged the organisation of a suffrage committee in Dublin, which by

1876 had developed into the Dublin Women's Suffrage Society.[7] But Tod's death in 1896 left a 'wide gap in the ranks of the early workers' for women's suffrage.[8] Nevertheless, the organisational foundations laid by her work enabled and inspired other women to participate in the most active phase of Irish suffragism in the early twentieth century.

As the suffrage movement gained momentum, it also diversified. The organisational structure of suffrage societies in Ulster could only be described as complex. By 1914 there were twenty separate associations in the province, ranging from the militant extremism of the suffragettes to the constitutional and religious based activities of the Belfast branch of the Church League for Women's Suffrage. Tod's North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society underwent several name changes but from 1909 was known as the Irish Women's Suffrage Society (IWSS). Based in Belfast, but with several branches outside the city, this non-party organisation leaned towards militancy.[9] A branch of the Men's Political Union was also established in Belfast, the only all-male suffrage society ever operative in Ireland.[10]

The establishment of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation (IWSF) in 1911 on the suggestion of Miss L.A. Walkington of Lisburn Suffrage Society provided some cohesion for many existing societies throughout Ireland.[11] But the federation never embraced all, and important organisations, like the Irish Women's Suffrage Society, remained independent. Nevertheless, the federation grew from an initial membership of four societies to twenty organisations, 70% of which were Ulster based by 1913.[12] Ulster societies were headed by a Northern Committee and were united under a non-militant and non-party policy. However, with regard to the latter, it seems there was some flexibility. For example, in 1914 Whitehead Suffrage Society closed its meetings with a rendition of the National Anthem, vocally identifying this organisation with the politics of unionism rather than with the federation's supposed policy of neutrality.

The public controversy surrounding the suffrage campaign ensured that no more than a minority of women were prepared to breach social taboos and declare themselves suffragists. This situation was not peculiar to Ulster, or to Ireland or Britain. Indeed, in Ulster, suffragists were numerically analogous to those in England. Although information regarding the size of individual suffrage societies is scarce, it has been claimed that approximately one thousand women were actively involved in the Ulster movement by 1914 - a figure which was comparable in density to English suffragists.[13] However, support for suffrage could be heightened by propaganda. Boosts to the membership of existing suffrage organisations and the impetus and inspiration for establishing new associations in Ulster were provided by visiting speakers. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Charlotte Despard, founder

of the Women's Freedom League, and Mrs Colby, secretary of the American Women's Equality Association, were amongst those visiting Ulster in the period 1910-12. To cite just one example of the impact of such visits, Belfast and District Women's Suffrage Week, held in April 1913 to coincide with a visit from Helen Fraser of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), led eighty-three women to join the IWSF and to the establishment of three new suffrage societies in Ulster.[14] However, following such initial local interest, it seems that membership of suffrage organisations only increased marginally. For instance, Lisburn Suffrage Society in County Antrim was able to double its membership within a year of its establishment in 1910, but from 1913 to 1914 it only added eight names to its membership list.[15] There were also considerable variations in the size of organisations in Ulster, which ranged from twenty to over one hundred members.[16]

Although overtures were made to attract working-class women into the movement, such as holding open-air meetings outside Belfast and Derry factories during lunch hours and addressing crowds from street corners, these initiatives met with limited success. In Ulster, as elsewhere throughout Ireland and in Britain, it was educated, middle-class women who formed the kernel of the suffrage movement. These women saw their campaign within the context of democracy, claiming that the absence of women from the governing institutions of the state was responsible for:

a dearth of thoughtful attention directed to matters which concern women more intimately ... than they can possibly concern men ... Votes for women will everywhere train and discipline the instinct of maternal responsibility; will elicit a volume and impulse of truer thinking on all subjects connected with the most elementary needs of the people.[17]

In essence, the vote came to symbolise women's emancipation from social drudgery, virtuous convention and economic and political subservience. Suffragists aimed to make women feel responsible for their own destinies, for those of their children and for their sex as a whole. These women therefore demanded that the vote be multifaceted, with 'the power to raise women morally, industrially and socially'.[18] Such an agenda was very apparent within Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society. This organisation associated the vote with many elements of progressive social reform. Addressing an open-air meeting at Belfast's Ormeau Park in 1913, Mrs Chambers, one of the most vocal Ulster suffragists, outlined the fallacy of denying women voting rights by proffering a maternal justification to suffrage claims and placing this argument against a backdrop of the leading Irish political personas:

The Law ... says a woman is quite competent to perform a surgical operation, yet not tell the difference between [the northern nationalist leader] Joe Devlin and [the unionist leader] Sir Edward Carson ... if it

were women's work to fit the children to go into the world, it was equally important to see that the world was a fit place for their children.[19]

The IWSS became the most dynamic suffrage association in Ulster, accredited with effecting 'a considerable change in the public attitude toward woman suffrage in Ulster'.[20] This organisation developed a liberal agenda to break what it referred to as 'the conspiracy of silence' with regard to publicly discussing social and moral problems.[21] Thus, at its weekly meetings, the desirability of extending the Bastardy and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act to Ireland, temperance, infant mortality, sex education, venereal disease, white slave trafficking, protective factory legislation for women and equal opportunities were all openly discussed. But in striving to break social taboos by publicly discussing such controversial issues, Belfast's IWSS ultimately failed to maximise its popular appeal, by discouraging those with more conservative beliefs from joining its ranks.

In an attempt to mobilise support, Ulster suffrage organisations held regular public meetings in Belfast and its environs, petitioned and heckled both unionist and nationalist political leaders, canvassed female municipal voters and worked to attain pro-suffrage resolutions from various local councils. Relations between suffragists in the north and south of the country were cordial – suffrage speakers visited sister societies, coordinated demands to include suffrage amendments to the third Home Rule Bill of 1912-14 and, from 1913, collectively repudiated the treatment which suffrage prisoners received. However, solidarity amongst Irish suffragists, although often lauded, was always fragile. Indeed, as early as 1912, the complexity of the Irish suffrage movement was believed to be in 'such a tangle that it may seem a somewhat perilous as it is most probably a thankless task to endeavour to unravel it'.[22]

Ulster suffragists always had an innate sense of their own identity. They formed local organisations, instead of joining all-Ireland or Dublin-based societies, and when an attempt was made in 1911 to coordinate suffragists throughout the country with the formation of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation, Ulster suffragists initiated a separate Northern Committee. However, a simple north/south divide cannot be unequivocally applied to Ireland. Within the Ulster suffrage movement, activity was largely confined to the urban areas of the six north-eastern counties: Cavan and Monaghan remained largely untouched by the women's campaign and although some suffrage meetings were held in Donegal, no reference is made to the establishment of suffrage organisations in this county. Furthermore, there appears to have been no cooperation between suffragists in Donegal and the rest of Ulster.

In addition to these geographical variations, the Irish suffrage movement experienced internal divisions due to the actions of militant

suffragettes and external pressures due to the mounting home rule crisis from 1912. However, suffragists remained aware of the importance of maintaining a public masquerade of unity. For instance, Dora Mellone of the Northern Committee of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation, addressing an audience of 50,000 at London's Hyde Park in 1913, emphasised that Irish suffrage societies were:

of all shades of political opinion, we have nationalists and unionists, orange and green, extremist and moderate. These women agreeing in nothing else agree on this one point ... no one else has ever done this, the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation is the only political organisation which has ever held the North and South together ... is not this something to be proud of when all else seems bent on creating division and discord. Is it a small thing that we alone will have tried to repair the ancient breeches.[23]

Yet, by focusing solely on the work of the federation, Mellone, somewhat ironically, prompted further internal disunity. Members of Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society wrote to the suffrage paper, the *Irish Citizen*, to highlight the fact that their organisation pre-dated the establishment of the federation and even accused the federation of reaping benefit from their earlier exertions in Ulster.[24] By 1915, the *Irish Citizen* was forced to comment on the lack of unity in the suffrage movement, albeit in lyrical tones, noting that 'the varied societies flitter away their power in internecine rivalries and antagonistic methods and principles ... Suffrage has wandered in a multiplicity of paths that seem to lead nowhere, save to labyrinthine confusion'.[25] And worse was to come.

The trepidation with which politicians viewed the impact of women's suffrage pre-dated the militant tenets of the movement. From 1868 to 1913, nine bills and one amendment to include women's suffrage in the 1884 Reform Act were unsuccessfully read in the House of Commons. No political party was prepared to adopt women's suffrage as a policy. In brief, the Labour Party supported adult suffrage in principle, but shared both Liberal and Irish nationalist concerns regarding the impact of increasing the number of propertied voters. Irish nationalist MPs were further concerned that suffrage would destroy party unanimity and impede the parliamentary progress of home rule.[26] Conservative and unionist opposition to suffrage was based on maintaining the status quo and in December 1911, Walter Long and Austen Chamberlain were amongst six unionist MPs who publicly appealed to members of their party to oppose the Conciliation Bill, believing that this suffrage measure represented:

the thin edge of the wedge, and must inevitably lead to adult woman suffrage ... to the enfranchisement of a majority of female over male voters ... consider the effects of this change ... limited woman suffrage has become impossible ... the choice lies between the enfranchisement

of all women or of none ... we suggest that a policy of opposition to the legislative proposals for women's suffrage ... is a policy on which all members of the party can whole-heartedly unite.[27]

Irish suffrage societies experienced significant difficulties working in this hostile political milieu. The Irish Women's Suffrage Society, in common with many Ulster suffrage societies, fought 'with the accepted thought that in Belfast nothing will be entertained but Home Rule struggling with Unionism'.[28] Lack of legislative progress caused widespread disillusion amongst suffragists and by the middle of 1912 the *Irish Citizen* alleged that 'official Unionism was as blind as official Nationalism' with regard to the women's question. It seems that suffragists felt an increasing sense of alienation from both politicians and the political system. Mrs Cope of Armagh Suffrage Society expressed her mistrust of 'any policy that would depend upon any political party. The history of the movement ... showed clearly how politicians had failed - no matter what they had promised - to accomplish anything for our cause'.[29]

One of the most significant effects of suffragists' disillusionment was the arousal of vociferous hostility towards women who advocated party political considerations, either nationalist or unionist, before the emancipation of their own sex. Beth McKillen has persuasively argued that the feud which developed between Irish nationalists and suffragists deprived the women's movement of much popular support.[30] But an assessment of suffragists' relationship with unionists, who were much more prominent and numerous in the six north-easterly counties of Ulster, suggests that this argument is also valid for the other side of the political spectrum. Although some suffragists undoubtedly had unionist sympathies, many suffragists and unionists viewed each other with suspicion. These misgivings were especially apparent since the outbreak of the third home rule crisis in 1912. This can be explained by the fact that many male and female unionists saw women's suffrage as a potentially dangerous political distraction from their anti-home rule campaign whilst suffragists objected to unionists making the 'fullest possible use of' female support without rewarding women with the vote.[31]

Suffragists' indiscriminate condemnation of 200,000 members of the female unionist organisation, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council (UWUC), effectively estranged the largest group of politically active women in Ireland from the suffrage campaign. The words of Mary Baker, a member of the Irish Women's Suffrage Society in Belfast, characterised this hostility as she advised women to 'pay more attention to the Anti-Suffrage attitude of ... [the unionist leader, Edward Carson] who is being so whole-heartedly supported by his Unionist women, and who yet has the insolence to ignore the right of women to enfranchisement'.[32] The moral distinctions which female unionists made in supporting unionist militancy such as gun-running and the threat of civil war, whilst opposing that of suffragettes, was declared by



the *Irish Citizen* to be 'quite nauseating' and unionist women were consistently ridiculed as 'weak-minded sisters ... trembling in the valley of the shadows of ... party'.<sup>[33]</sup> With these sentiments, the idea of suffrage successfully cutting across the barriers of Irish party politics must be redefined.

In September 1913, the unionist party's decision to grant votes for women under their plans for the establishment of provisional government in Ulster caused considerable tension within the already fractured suffrage movement. Unionists presented this as a logical extension of the existing close relationship between male and female unionists instead of any sort of concession to suffragists. The *Irish Citizen*, however, believed that a precedent had been set for Britain as a whole and Elizabeth Priestly McCracken of Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society was amongst many suffragists who believed this to be an 'epoch-making [and] amazing marriage of Unionism and Woman Suffrage'.<sup>[34]</sup> However, as a marriage this was to be both short-lived and unhappy. Within suffrage societies, especially in Ulster, rivalries arose over who could claim to have been instrumental in winning this pledge from unionists. But even in the midst of the initial triumphalism there was some scepticism. As Mrs Chambers from Belfast wrote, for women to depend on Edward Carson for liberation was akin to following 'a will o' the wisp. The only thing they can rely on with any certainty is the known record of ... Carson's attitude to the Suffrage movement'.<sup>[35]</sup> Another prominent northern suffragist, Margaret McCoubrey, was equally distrustful as she opined, 'We know that whatever Party places a Suffrage Bill on the Statute Book, will simply do so to save its own skin ... No doubt the Ulster Unionist Council would already gladly forget that such a statement was ever made. Sir Edward Carson seems most anxious to forget it'.<sup>[36]</sup>

These were to be prophetic words as the unionist suffrage pledge was neither confirmed nor fulfilled. Following the formal constitution of the unionists' provisional government in September 1913, no definite statement on women's position was alluded to. Indeed, Carson made no mention of women, emphasising instead that 'they wanted men who would devote their time and make great sacrifices'.<sup>[37]</sup> Pessimism concerning unionist sincerity became widespread amongst suffragists, prompting the *Irish Citizen* to be more openly hostile towards unionist women than ever before. In a front-page article, the paper declared that members of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council were 'servile party women'.<sup>[38]</sup> Later, the *Citizen* went as far as to scorn the work of the Women's Unionist Council and its 'Slavish attitude ... to toady for the men ... Women ... who display this crawling servility to the men of their party, deserve nothing but contempt'.<sup>[39]</sup> Many suffragists subsequently attempted to distance themselves from unionists,

asserting that they had never attached much practical importance to the pledge and that its significance lay solely in a concession of principle.

However, the suffrage movement was further complicated by the development of this anti-unionist stance. Some suffragists, especially in Ulster, believed the level of criticism directed towards unionists, and especially to unionist women, was unjust. An anonymous letter, published in the *Citizen* in February 1914, ascertained that members of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council were making positive advances by invalidating:

the cowardly desire to enjoy all the advantages of the State and leave to men all the drudgery of political life ... The women of Ulster have left the Home ... They realise that there is work in the political sphere for women as well as men ... They have compelled their men to testify to their political ability and intelligence ... [They] show that the interests of human beings are stronger than those of sex ... they are a fine practical argument against Anti-feminists.[40]

A letter from an unnamed Orange Lodge further highlighted the fact that the continued defamation of unionism in the pages of the *Irish Citizen*, as the organ of all suffragists, minimised support for the women's cause in Ulster and alleged, with some accuracy, that such 'a display of political animus has lost the suffrage cause many friends North of the Boyne'.[41]

Although the petitions and public demonstrations of constitutional suffragists should be accredited with possessing considerable originality and courage, no sustained public debate was initiated by their activities. In comparison, the suffragette campaign demanded attention by the sheer veracity of its challenge. The significance of Irish suffragists abandoning constitutional methods was realised by one of the foremost Irish suffragists, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, in 1912:

Now that the first stone has been thrown ... light is being admitted into more than mere Government quarters, and the cobwebs are being cleared away from more than one male intellect ... The novelty of Irish women resorting to violence on their own behalf is ... startling to their countrymen who have been accustomed for so long to accept their services ... in furtherance of the cause of male liberties. There is an element of unwomanly selfishness in the idea of women fighting for themselves repellent to the average man ... [militancy] will be interesting material for the psychologist working out a research thesis on Female Patience in the 19th century.[42]

Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society was responsible for the earliest suffragette protests in Ulster. This organisation defended militant tactics in August 1912 and just a few months later the first outbreak of suffragette violence occurred in Ulster, when windows were broken in Belfast's Donegall Square GPO in protest against the defeat of Snowden's suffrage

amendment to the Home Rule Bill.[43] There were further outbreaks of militancy in Ulster during 1913: from February to April nine pillar boxes were attacked in Belfast and in one instance wires were cut in a Belfast telephone box. By the middle of 1913, Belfast's IWSS formed a small militant committee and publicly aired emotive arguments in support of militant action, claiming, 'if legalised protection of little children could be brought a week nearer by our vote, [they] defied ... women ... to say that we would not be right to burn down every public building in the land'.[44]

But the scale and pace of militancy in Ulster increased dramatically following the establishment of a branch of the Pankhursts' WSPU in Belfast in September 1913. Initially, the WSPU's interest in Irish affairs was prompted by the Irish nationalists' refusal to support women's suffrage. As a result, from 1910 the Pankhursts were in contact with the more militant Irish suffrage societies and both Margaret Robinson and Dr Elizabeth Bell of Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society were imprisoned in Holloway in November 1911 for suffragette protests which were carried out in conjunction with the WSPU in London. In July of the following year, two WSPU members caused serious disturbances in Dublin, which culminated in a hatchet being thrown at the Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith.[45] However, in 1913, the attention of this now notorious organisation was attracted to Ulster as a result of the unionists' unfulfilled suffrage pledge.

Militancy intensified the existing chasms within the northern suffrage movement. Individual members resigned and whole societies changed their name and passed anti-militant resolutions in order to distance themselves from the suffragettes. Moreover, the arrival of the WSPU in Belfast led the *Irish Citizen* to criticise northern suffrage societies, questioning whether they had been as active 'as they should have been? If not, they can hardly be surprised if [this organisation] enter on a neglected field of action'.[46] Ulster societies tried to defend themselves against this charge. However, the leading article in the next edition of the *Irish Citizen* reaffirmed the belief that Ulster societies had not 'done as much as they should ... namely bringing pressure to bear on ... Carson'.[47] The paper also expressed the views of the majority of suffragists in Ireland by opposing the establishment of any English association in Ireland, believing that only indigenous suffrage organisations could fully comprehend 'the psychology of their countrymen'.[48]

This opposition did not affect either the Irish Women's Suffrage Society, which declared itself a solely militant association on 18 September 1913, or the Belfast branch of the WSPU. A large number of members were not required for effective suffragette protest as a small body of dedicated workers could cause widespread disruption, attracting both press and public attention. The theme of self-sacrifice was paramount amongst suffragettes and in Ireland they were able to draw interesting vindication for the use of

violence from the country's past experience of using violence as a political weapon. Indeed, Ireland's turbulent past was often used to justify female militancy. From July 1912, the *Irish Citizen* issued warnings about provoking women to militant action, noting that 'Ireland is a dangerous country in which to run risks of that character. There is an abundance of revolutionary material ... owing to its past history ... concede, before it is too late'.[49] Margaret McCoubrey of Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society claimed that suffragettes were continuing an Irish tradition of violent protest, whilst her compatriot, Mary Baker, ascertained that the 'spirit of revolt was in Irish blood'.[50] However, this exoneration was not only grounded in Ireland's past. The unionist threat of civil war at the height of the third home rule crisis provided a contemporary parallel for suffragettes. Indeed, as the suffragette campaign escalated in Ulster, many comparisons were drawn between the treatment afforded to militant women and that of Ulster unionists. In 1914, for example, Christabel Pankhurst poignantly asked, 'Why is the W.S.P.U. attacked, its offices raided, its paper assailed; while the militant Ulster [unionist] organisation and its leaders are unmolested, its headquarters not raided, and the Unionist press, constantly inciting to militancy, not attacked?'[51] Moreover, in her account of the suffragette campaign, Christabel's sister, Sylvia, purported that 'the Irish conflict remained a perpetual incitement ... a spur and a stimulus to feminine militancy'.[52]

Joint meetings were held between the Irish Women's Suffrage Society and the WSPU in Belfast from September 1913. But by April 1914, so many members of the Irish Women's Suffrage Society had joined the ranks of the Pankhursts' organisation that the former society was officially disbanded. In Ulster, the WSPU's initial aim was to force Carson to fulfil his suffrage pledge of September 1913 and a campaign of arson was only initiated once it became apparent that the unionist's assurance was hollow in intent. Dorothy Evans, the WSPU organiser in Ulster, wrote a series of letters to Carson, reminding him of his suffrage pledge, and members of the Belfast branch held a four and a half day doorstep siege at his London home in an attempt to clarify the unionist position. Carson eventually received this deputation, but due to disunity amongst his party, 'he was not prepared to give them a guarantee that he would stand out for the rights of Ulsterwomen under the Imperial Government. He said he looked upon the Provisional Government as something different, because it was only a larger extension of local government'.[53]

As a result of this unsatisfactory answer, the waiting game which Ulster suffragettes played in Ulster was brusquely concluded. At a meeting held in Belfast's Ulster Hall on 13 March 1914, Dorothy Evans eloquently and publicly removed the suffragette truce:

Carson was no friend of women unless he was prepared to stand and champion their rights as strongly as he championed the rights of men ... he was their enemy, and he would be fought as any other politician ... who had the power and did not use it to get their rights ... they ... declared war on ... Carson ... The civil war that was absolutely certain was the one between the women and the powers that be.[54]

These caveats soon came to fruition. During the following week there were twenty pillar-box attacks in Belfast and by April 1914 the *Irish Citizen* believed Belfast to be in the midst of a 'genuine revolution'. [55] To maintain such a high level of public interest by shock tactics alone, the only path open to suffragettes was escalating violence. As a result, of seven suffragette arson attacks carried out in Britain between 10 April and 3 May 1914, five occurred in Ulster. Moreover, in a six-month period from March 1914, thirteen women were arrested in Ulster for suffragette activities, using thirst and hunger strikes for up to six days at a time to secure their release. These women initiated what can only be described as a dynamic campaign: eleven arson attacks were carried out, focusing mainly on unionist owned property, but Newtownards Race Stand in County Down, Ballylesson Church in Lisburn, County Antrim and Belfast's Bowling Pavilion were amongst the public properties which were also burnt. Golf greens were destroyed, windows were smashed at unionist headquarters and suffragettes broke into the homes of the unionists' second in command, James Craig, and Belfast's Lord Mayor. In addition to this, an unnamed suffragette even burst into the offices of the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* and the *Belfast News-letter* to slap the papers' editors on the face in response to them inciting readers to take the law into their own hands to deter militant action. Ulster suffragette militancy climaxed with a bomb attempt on Lisburn's Church of Ireland Cathedral on 31 July 1914, an event which the prominent unionist, Lady Lilian Spender, recorded in her diary:

I heard about 3 o'clock, what I thought was a big gun firing, but it proved next day to be an explosion caused by Suffragettes, who blew out the ancient east window in Lisburn Cathedral, the brutes. They were all staying with Mrs. Metge, a Lisburn and a most militant lady, and today I believe nearly all the windows in her house are broken.[56]

The four suffragettes arrested for this attack had to receive police protection from hostile crowds whilst being taken into custody.

Animosity towards the militant campaign was further intensified by the existence of the Malicious Injuries (Ireland) Act, which facilitated the increase of rates to cover the cost of damage incurred to private property. As the Ulster suffragette campaign focused on privately owned unionist property, this meant that the general public was forced to pay in material terms for female militancy. For example, Sir Hugh McCalmont and Bishop

Henry received £11,000 and £20,000 compensation respectively from the Belfast authorities for arson attacks on their properties and in total Antrim had to pay £92,000 in damages for property destroyed in the suffragette campaign and a three penny levy in the pound was consequently applied to the county's rates.[57]

Acrimony amongst the general public augmented as the suffragette campaign intensified in Ulster, and gradually jeers and ridicule developed into violence. For instance, there were violent scenes when suffragettes heckled the northern nationalist leader, Joseph Devlin, at a meeting in Belfast. Even with the added protection of members of the Men's Political Union 'to save the women from rough handling', one woman was thrown downstairs.[58] Lilian Spender's account of the crowd reaction to a suffragette disruption of a unionist demonstration further highlights this hostility: 'Two Suffragettes interrupted while ... [Carson] was speaking, but I heard nothing but the roar of fury that went up from the crowd the moment they began. They were speedily disposed of'.[59]

Belfast suffragettes received anonymous letters threatening physical violence if their militant campaign continued and these women were followed by police and threatened with conspiracy charges. The WSPU's Ulster leader, Dorothy Evans, brought an assault charge and case for false imprisonment against Belfast authorities and attacks at suffragette meetings became increasingly frequent in Ulster.[60] For instance, in May 1914 a WSPU poster parade at Belfast harbour awaiting Carson's arrival was attacked by male and, interestingly, some female unionists, who subjected suffragettes to 'physical abuse'. One suffragette was taken to hospital in a state of collapse after the crowd 'pulled her hair, and disarranged her clothing[,] portions of which were practically torn to tatters'.[61] There were also reports of female day trippers being attacked in County Antrim on the mere suspicion of being suffragettes [62] and even the usually conservative *Church of Ireland Gazette* was sufficiently outraged by the campaign to refer to the women responsible as 'vile ... dangerous ... enemies of society'.[63] But at the apex of suffragette disorder in Ulster, amidst controversy, violence and angst, the campaign was abandoned.

The immediate and absolute cessation of the suffragette campaign throughout Britain and the closure of WSPU offices in Belfast were a direct response to the outbreak of the First World War. This decision was reportedly 'received with displeasure and disgust by some of the keenest of its Irish members' - none of whom were consulted about this decision.[64] The War not only caused serious disruption within suffragette ranks, but also marked the demise of the whole suffrage movement. As one of the principal feminists in Ulster remarked, 'When the first cannon-shot crashed through the peace of Europe, the world of Woman Suffrage was shaken to its depths. Its organisation, its funds, its raison d'être seemed threatened

and unstable ... Some Suffragists became war partisans, some became peace partisans'.[65] In addition to the existing political differences and divergences of opinion on the merits of militant as opposed to constitutional action, during the War the *Irish Citizen* became increasingly pacifist. Therefore patriotic suffragists in Ireland, who were most numerous in Ulster, found themselves alienated and denied a public platform. In addition, from 1916, in the aftermath of the Easter Rising in Dublin, the *Irish Citizen* also became more sympathetic towards Irish nationalism, supporting anti-conscription and campaigning for political status for republican prisoners. This further diminished the paper's appeal to many Ulster suffragists.

Following the withdrawal of the WSPU from Belfast, the Irish Women's Franchise League, a militant organisation which had not previously established any branches in Ulster, set up an Ulster Centre in Belfast. This organisation adopted a 'Suffrage First' policy and interpreted the War as a result of male misgovernment. However, the Ulster Centre faced increasing difficulties and by 1915 it was forced to abandon regular meetings and an open-air campaign because of insufficient support. This organisation petered out in Ulster, leaving the most committed feminists to work on an individual basis. Thus, Margaret McCoubrey ran a month-long peace and suffrage campaign in Belfast single-handedly in August 1917, inspired by her belief that 'a woman looking down on a battlefield would not see dead Germans or dead Englishmen but so many mother's sons'.[66] Despite the eloquence of McCoubrey's plea, the majority of women in Ulster perceived pacifism as unpatriotic and female suffrage as unimportant in comparison with the dangers threatening wartime Europe. As a result, only a few suffragists remained active during the War, such as the Church League for Women's Suffrage, which continued to meet in Belfast, and the Northern Committee of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation, which, although mostly involved in the war effort, conducted some suffrage work.

The wartime coalition government included many more suffrage supporters than its forerunner.[67] This, along with women's war work and the required updating of the electoral register to include servicemen, which allowed women's suffrage to be presented within the context of general electoral reform, combined to secure a measure of women's suffrage in 1918. Fears of a regeneration of pre-war militancy may have been a government consideration, but as the very women who had been most disruptive in the pre-war era had become dedicated pro-war campaigners, it seems unlikely that this was a major factor. The establishment of a female electoral majority was avoided by introducing an age qualifier of thirty for women voters. Therefore politicians were apparently reassured by the likelihood of the new woman voter being 'a stable element in a changing world, one who was unlikely to seek to promote radical, feminist issues in parliament'.[68] The suffrage campaign, which had been such a compelling

force in the decade preceding the outbreak of the First World War, certainly prepared both parliament and the general public for this legislative advance. Nevertheless, Ulster suffragists, like their British counterparts, issued only a muted welcome to this measure of women's enfranchisement. Although the principle of women's suffrage was conceded, it was believed that women had only won their first move in the political game and should work to ensure 'the ... emancipation of those women still outside the pale'.<sup>[69]</sup>

The passage of women's suffrage did not lead to any sense of reconciliation amongst women. The *Irish Citizen* continued to deride unionist women and viewed Carson's 1918 electoral appeal to the newly enfranchised women voters of Ulster with nothing short of contempt. Indeed, the paper could only express its 'pity for Unionist women who follow such a leader'.<sup>[70]</sup> There were also significant apertures within the suffrage movement, as after 1918 few attempts were made to unite women. This disunity experienced by suffragists throughout Ireland follows the pattern of both American and British suffragists, who all failed to regain their former impetus.<sup>[71]</sup> It is unclear whether the remaining suffrage societies continued to exist following the collapse of the *Irish Citizen* in 1920. Thereafter Ireland was partitioned and the establishment of the Northern Ireland state again brought constitutional politics to the fore. Within this political climate no women in Ulster, whether of feminist, nationalist or unionist persuasions, came forward to publicly call for equal suffrage.

An examination of the Ulster suffrage movement highlights not only the necessity of conducting local studies in order to capture and understand the complexity of the suffrage campaign, but also the tensions and frustrations which women faced whilst campaigning for the enfranchisement of their own sex. Post-war feminists like Elizabeth Priestley McCracken from Belfast articulated a progressive vision of women's future. In McCracken's interpretation, wives should be economically free, mothers should possess full rights of guardianship, and equal pay for equal work should be an accepted right, with all trades and professions being open to women. But the fulfilment of these objectives stretched beyond the inter-war years. Indeed, the positive impact of the First World War with regard to women's position was questionable in its long-term gains and the main desire after the signing of the Armistice was to return to pre-war normalcy. Women were therefore displaced from the jobs of men, and maternalism, pronatalism and domesticity became prominent inter-war themes. So although much was entrusted in the vote as the ultimate vehicle to sexual equality, the aftermath of enfranchisement failed to realise McCracken's vision and proved that equality could never be attained by purely legislative means.



### Notes

- [1] *Irish Citizen* (hereafter *IC*), 17 January 1914. The *Irish Citizen* was a suffrage paper established by James Cousins and Francis Sheehy Skeffington in May 1912. It provides the main source for the history of the Irish suffrage movement. Historical work on the Irish suffrage movement includes, for example: Rosemary Cullen Owens (1984) *Smashing Times: a history of the Irish suffrage movement, 1889-1922* (Dublin: Attic Press); Cliona Murphy (1989) *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf); Margaret MacCurtain (1978) Women, the Vote and Revolution, in Margaret MacCurtain & Donnacha O Corrian (Eds) *Women in Irish Society: the historical dimension*, pp. 46-57 (Dublin: Arlen House); Margaret Ward (1982) 'Suffrage First - above all else!': an account of the Irish suffrage movement, *Feminist Review*, 10, pp. 22-36; Rosemary Cullen Owens (1983) Votes for Ladies, Votes for Women: organised labour and the suffrage movement, 1876-1922, *Saothar*, 9, pp. 32-47; Mary Cullen (1985) How Radical was Irish Feminism between 1860-1920? in P.J. Corish (Ed.) *Radicals, Rebels and Establishments*, pp. 185-210 (Belfast: Appletree Press); Marie O' Neill (1985) The Dublin Women's Suffrage Society and Its Successors, *Dublin Historical Record*, 37, pp. 126-140; Leah Levenson & Jerry Naderstad (1988) *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: a pioneering Irish feminist* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press); Cliona Murphy (1990) 'The Tune of the Stars and the Stripes': the American influence on the suffrage movement, in Mary Cullen & Maria Luddy (Eds) *Women Surviving*, pp. 180-205 (Swords: Poolbeg Press); Dana Hearne (1992) The *Irish Citizen*, 1914-1916: nationalism, feminism and militarism, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18, pp. 1-14; Louise Ryan (1992) The *Irish Citizen*, 1912-20, *Saothar*, 17, pp. 105-111; Marie O'Neill (1993) The Struggle of Irish Women for the Vote, *Breifne*, 8, pp. 338-353; Louise Ryan (1994) Women without Votes: the political strategies of the Irish suffrage movement, *Irish Political Studies*, 9, pp. 119-139; Maria Luddy (1995) *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington* (Dundalk: Historical Association of Ireland pamphlet) and Margaret Ward (1997) *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: a life* (Cork: Attic Press).
- [2] Renate Bridenthal & Claudia Koonz (Eds) (1977) *Becoming Visible: women in European history*, p. 2 (Boston: Houghton).
- [3] Marilyn J. Boxer & Jean H. Quataert (Eds) (1987) *Connecting Spheres: women in the Western world, 1500 to present*, p. 197 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- [4] David Morgan (1975) *Suffragists and Liberals: the politics of woman suffrage in England*, p. 14 (Oxford: Blackwell).
- [5] Isabella Tod (1884) Women and the New Franchise Bill: a letter to an Ulster Member of Parliament, in Jane Lewis (Ed.) (1987) *Before the Vote Was Won: arguments for and against women's suffrage*, p. 397 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul). Tod was a unionist, education reformer and temperance activist. She was also involved in the campaigns for the repeal

- of married women's property law and the Contagious Diseases Acts. For information on Tod, see Maria Luddy (1995) Isabella M.S. Tod, in Mary Cullen & Maria Luddy (Eds) *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th-century Ireland*, pp. 197-230 (Dublin: Attic Press) and Heliose Brown (1998) An Alternative Imperialism: Isabella Tod, internationalist and 'Good Liberal Unionist', *Gender and History*, 10, pp. 358-380.
- [6] Tod, 'Women and the New Franchise Bill', pp. 396-403.
- [7] This organisation was later renamed the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA) and became one of the most important suffrage organisations in Ireland.
- [8] Helen Blackburn (1971 reprint edition) *Women's Suffrage: a record of the women's suffrage movement in the British Isles*, p. 127 (New York: Kraus Reprint Company; first published 1902, London).
- [9] The IWSS had branches in Bangor, County Down, Whitehead in County Antrim and Derry in County Londonderry.
- [10] The Belfast branch, established in January 1914, was affiliated to the London headquarters of this organisation, which was established by Victor Duval in 1910. It was an auxiliary of the WSPU until 1913.
- [11] L.A. Walkington was a pioneer of equal education in Ireland. She was the first Irish woman to be awarded an LLD degree.
- [12] The following suffrage societies were affiliated to the Northern Committee of the IWSF: Belfast, Warrenpoint and Rostrevor, Newry, Armagh, Lisburn, Portrush, Bushmills, Londonderry, Holywood, Larne, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Portadown and Whitehead.
- [13] The *Irish Citizen* claimed on 30 May 1914 that there were approximately 3500 suffragists throughout Ireland. A degree of exaggeration is to be expected in these figures, but in the absence of detailed records for individual suffrage societies it is difficult to accurately gauge the popularity of the Ulster suffrage movement.
- [14] The new societies were set up in Portadown in County Armagh, Holywood in County Down and Larne in County Antrim.
- [15] This brought membership figures to a total of 85 by February 1914.
- [16] See, for example, the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation membership figures, in *IC*, 18 April 1914.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 23 November 1912. For a discussion of this in a British context, see Constance Rover (1967) *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul & Toronto University Press). Other work on the British suffrage movement includes, for example: A.E. Metcalfe (1917) *Woman's Effort; a chronicle of British women's fifty years' struggle for citizenship 1865-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell); Ray Strachey (1928) *The Cause, a Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: G. Bell & Sons); Roger Fulford (1957) *Votes for Women, the Story of a Struggle* (London: Faber & Faber); Christabel Pankhurst (1959) *Unshackled, the Story of How We Won the Vote* (London:

Hutchinson); David Mitchell (1967) *The Fighting Pankhursts* (London: Jonathan Cape); Antonia Raeburn (1973) *The Militant Suffragettes* (London: Michael Joseph); Jill Liddington & Jill Norris (1978) *One Hand Tied Behind Us: the rise of the women's suffrage movement* (London: Virago); Brian Harrison (1978) *Separate Spheres: the opposition to women's suffrage in Britain* (London: Croom Helm); Brian Harrison (1982) The Act of Militancy, Violence and the Suffragettes, 1904-14, in his *Peaceable Kingdom: stability and change in modern Britain*, pp. 26-81 (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Sandra Stanley Holton (1986) *Feminism and Democracy: women's suffrage and reform politics in Britain 1900-18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Susan Kingsley Kent (1987) *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press); Lisa Tickner (1987) *The Spectacle of Women: imagery of the suffrage campaign, 1907-14* (London: Chatto & Windus); Jane Marcus (Ed.) (1987) *Suffrage and the Pankhursts* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); Martin Pugh (1990) *Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1867-1928* (London: Historical Association, pamphlet); Sandra Stanley Holton (1992) The Suffragist and the 'Average Woman', *Women's History Review*, 1, pp. 9-24.

- [18] *IC*, 17 May 1913. Report of a meeting of Lisburn Suffrage Society, affiliated to the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 9 August 1913.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 25 May 1912.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 29 November 1913.
- [22] Frederick Ryan (1912) The Suffrage Tangle, *The Irish Review*, p. 346.
- [23] Taped interview with Margaret Robinson on suffrage activity in Belfast recorded in 1975, Public Record of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), TP/35. Robinson was the secretary of Belfast's Irish Women's Suffrage Society before joining the Belfast branch of the WSPU in 1913. In November 1911 she was imprisoned in Holloway for two months with Dr Elizabeth Bell, also of the Irish Women's Suffrage Society, for breaking windows during a suffragette demonstration in London.
- [24] *IC*, 9 August 1913.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 20 February 1915.
- [26] Irish nationalist opposition defeated the 1912 Suffrage Bill and subsequent amendments to include women's suffrage in the Third Home Rule Bill.
- [27] *The Times*, 1 December 1911. This letter was signed by F.G. Banbury, Walter H. Long, Austen Chamberlain, Arnold Ward, F.E. Smith, Helmsley.
- [28] *IC*, 17 May 1913.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 31 January 1914.
- [30] Beth McKillen (1982) Irish Feminism and National Separatism, 1914-1923, *Eire-Ireland*, 17, pp. 52-67, 72-90.
- [31] *IC*, 6 September 1913. It should be noted that the *Irish Citizen* was equally hostile to women enrolled in auxiliary nationalist organisations such as

- Cumann na mBan (Women's Council). See McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and National Separatism'.
- [32] *IC*, 2 August 1913.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 6 September 1913.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 20 September 1913.
- [35] *Ibid.*
- [36] *Ibid.*, 18 October 1918.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 24 January 1914.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 27 September 1914.
- [39] *Ibid.*, 11 April 1914.
- [40] *Ibid.*, 7 February 1914.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 14 February 1914.
- [42] Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (July 1912) The Women's Franchise Movement – Ireland, *The Irish Review*, pp. 226-227.
- [43] This occurred in November 1912.
- [44] *IC*, 23 August 1913
- [45] For details of the activities of the WSPU in Ireland, see Owens, *Smashing Times*; Murphy, *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society* and Ward, 'Suffrage First – above all else!'
- [46] *IC*, 20 September 1913.
- [47] *Ibid.*
- [48] *Ibid.*, 13 September 1913. In line with these sentiments, the *Irish Citizen* did not welcome the establishment of the English-based organisation, the Men's Political Union, in Belfast in 1914. See *IC*, 21 February 1914.
- [49] *Ibid.*, 27 July 1912. Sandra Stanley Holton (1990) records the WSPU's regular use of past revolutionary movements in her article, 'In Sorrowful Wrath: suffrage militancy and the romantic feminism of Emmeline Pankhurst', in Harold L. Smith (Ed.) *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 7-24 (Aldershot: Edward Elgar).
- [50] *IC*, 5 July 1913.
- [51] *The Suffragette*, 29 May 1914.
- [52] E.S. Pankhurst (1977 reprint edition) *The Suffragette Movement*, pp. 547-548 (London: Virago; first published 1931, London: Longman, Green & Company).
- [53] *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 14 March 1914.
- [54] *Ibid.*
- [55] *IC*, 18 April 1914.
- [56] Diary of Lady Lilian Spender, 31 July 1914, PRONI, D/1633/2/19.
- [57] Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p. 549.
- [58] *IC*, 29 December 1913.

- [59] Diary of Lady Lilian Spender, 6 June 1914, PRONI, D/1633/2/19.
- [60] Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p. 549.
- [61] *IC*, 13 June 1914.
- [62] *Ibid.*, 27 June 1914. A magistrate cautioned those involved and deemed this attack a regrettable misunderstanding. This led the *Irish Citizen* to conclude that the underlying assumption was that if the women had been suffragettes the attack would have been justified.
- [63] Murphy, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 150.
- [64] *IC*, 22 August 1914.
- [65] *Ibid.*, 20 February 1915. This is an extract from an article by Elizabeth Priestly McCracken.
- [66] *Ibid.*, 23 January 1915.
- [67] Lloyd George was premier from 1916 and his cabinet included Arthur Balfour, Andrew Bonar Law and Lords Shelbourne and Cecil.
- [68] Martin Pugh (1992) *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959*, p. 42 (London: Macmillan).
- [69] *IC*, July 1918. From February 1916 the *Irish Citizen* was published monthly instead of weekly.
- [70] *Ibid.*, December 1918.
- [71] See McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and National Separatism'.

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