

Constance Lytton's Protest against Forcible Feeding

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1. Introduction

Constance Lytton (1869-1923), one of the most prominent suffragettes, protested against the British government, which denied women the right to vote, and contributed significantly to women's acquisition of the franchise. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Constance Lytton, the second daughter and the third child in the family of three daughters and four sons of Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, first earl of Lytton, and Edith Bulwer-Lytton, was born in Vienna in 1869. She was connected to a wide range of aristocratic and artistic circles. Her father was a diplomat and poet, and she spent her childhood in Vienna, Paris, India, London, and the family seat in Hertfordshire. In 1892, she visited South Africa with her mother, where she met the feminist, Olive Schreiner. When her godmother left her a legacy of £1000, she donated it to the revival of Morris dancing, and met Mary Neal, the organiser of the Esperance Guild for working girls, and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, treasurer of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). In 1909, she joined the WSPU.

As a suffragette, Lytton not only carried out militant acts but also went undercover as 'Jane Warton', a member of the working class, to reveal the cruelty of forced feeding in jail. Having been forcibly fed eight times, she lectured about her horrible experience and published her memoir, *Prisons and Prisoners* (1914). Her courage and self-sacrifice have inspired countless people, including us today. In 1975, 'a landmark BBC series on the suffrage movement, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, dedicated an entire episode to' her (Jenkins 265). Moreover, in 2016, a play on her life was performed at Newnham College on International Women's Day.

Although much attention has been paid to the women's suffrage movement in Britain and many books and articles refer to Constance Lytton's contribution to the movement, her life and memoir have yet to be fully evaluated. With regard to her life, two biographies, Patricia Miles and Jill William's *An Uncommon*



Figure 1
Lady Constance Georgina Bulwer-Lytton
Letters of Constance Lytton (Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.2.)

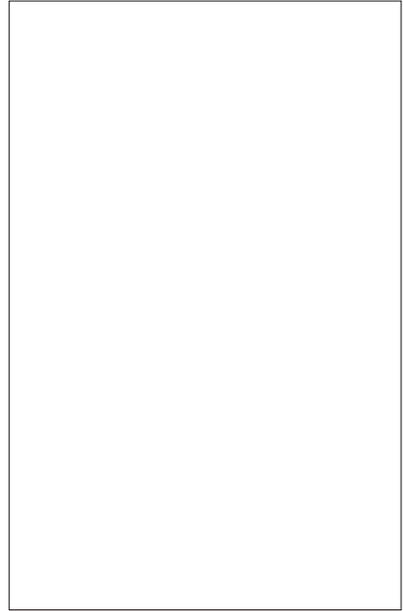


Figure 2
Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence
by Unknown photographer
postcard print
NPG x4519
(National Portrait Gallery)

Criminal: The Life of Lady Constance Lytton: Militant Suffragette 1869-1923 (1999) and Lyndsey Jenkins's *Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr* (2015), have been published, but her memoir *Prisons and Prisoners* has not been analysed in detail. The purpose of this paper is to reveal how Lytton promoted the women's suffrage movement by describing not only the suffragettes' shared cause, zeal, and hardships but also her own thoughts and personal experiences in her memoir.

2. The Awakening

Constance Lytton's *Prisons and Prisoners*, a piece of 'prison memoirs' (Haslam 25), is also her autobiography and manifesto. In the book, Lytton explains why and how she became a member of the WSPU. The WSPU was led by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928). Molly Housego and Neil R. Storey state that 'as the nineteenth century drew to a close Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst had become prominent activists in the women's suffrage movement' (11). Emmeline's father was co-founder of a cotton-printing and bleach works at Seedley, and her parents 'were keen supporters of universal suffrage (votes for both men and women) and involved all their children in social activism from an early age' (Housego and Storey 11). Her husband, Dr Richard Pankhurst, was 'a well-known advocate of women's suffrage



Figure 3
Emmeline Pankhurst addressing a crowd in Trafalgar Square
by Central Press
bromide press print, October 1908
NPG x131784
(National Portrait Gallery)

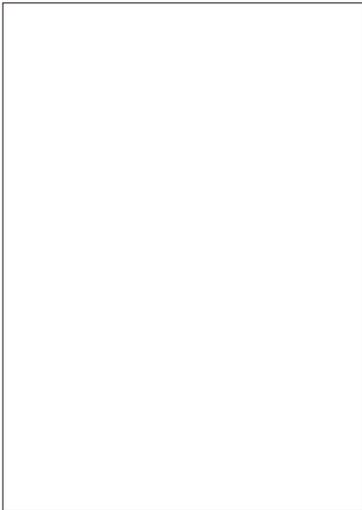


Figure 4
Emmeline Pankhurst
by Underwood & Underwood
vintage print, 1910s
NPG x194159
(National Portrait Gallery)

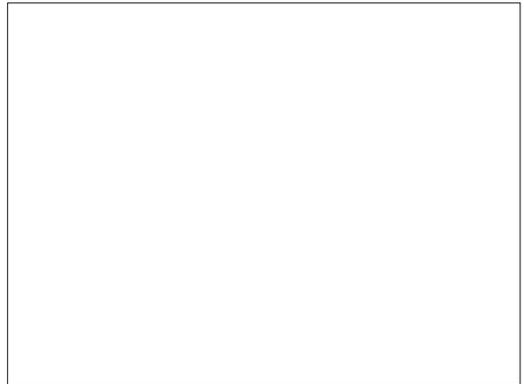


Figure 5
Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest at Buckingham Palace
by Unknown photographer
vintage print, 21 May 1914
NPG x137689
(National Portrait Gallery)

and other causes, including freedom of speech and education reform' (12). The WSPU was founded in 1903 and had exclusively female membership. Its motto was 'Deeds not Words'. Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the WSPU, seemed to have been considered a masculine type of woman. Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell point out that Edwardian feminists remained masculine women to their opponents despite abundant evidence to the contrary, and refer to Lady Duff Gordon's surprise at Emmeline Pankhurst's 'gentility' when she first met her (152). In contrast, Constance Lytton was deeply impressed by E. Pankhurst's presence of mind and altruism. Lytton describes her first impression of Pankhurst as follows:

A splendour of defiance and indignation pervaded her face, yet she was controlled and her attitude conveyed no suggestion of personal grievance. From that moment I recognized in her, and I have held the vision undimmed ever since, the guardian protector of this amazing woman's movement, conscious not only of the thousands who follow her lead today, but of the martyred generations of the past and of the women of the future whose welfare depends upon the path hewn out for them today. (*Prisons and Prisoners* 69)

She emphasises that Pankhurst bears in her mind all women, including the women of the past and future.

As one of the upper-class women, Lytton defines herself in her memoir as follows:

Without doubt I myself was one of that numerous gang of upper class leisured class spinsters, unemployed, unpropertied, unendowed, uneducated, without equipment or training for public service, economically dependent entirely upon others, not masters of their own leisure, however oppressively abundant that might seem to the onlooker. (78)

Before joining the WSPU, Lytton considered herself useless, 'economically dependent entirely upon others.' She thinks the circumstances under which most upper-class women live should be changed, and they ought to have a sense of kinship with other women. Using the metaphor of a necklace, she says 'the weakest link in the chain of womanhood is the woman of the leisured class'.

I thought of them as beads of a necklace, detached, helpless and useless, and wondered how long it would be before they were threaded together by means of the women's movement into a great organised band, self-expressive yet co-ordinated, and ruled by the bond of mutual service. The test of a chain's strength is in its weakest link. Where is our chain weakest? ... No, the weakest link in the chain of womanhood is the woman of the leisured class. Isolated and detached, she has but little sense of kinship with other women. (*Prisons and Prisoners* 143-44)

Marie Mulvey-Roberts states that 'it is likely that she was reacting against being a member of a family whose conspicuous display of wealth epitomised colonialism and aristocracy' and 'her compassionate nature, love for animals and delicate health developed into an empathy with those who were powerless, exploited and marginalised' (162-63). Thus, she dedicated herself to protest activities as a member of the WSPU to strengthen the bond between working women and upper-class women.

3. 'I shall remember'

When Lytton participated in her first deputation, however, she hesitated because she feared that she might not be equipped to represent working women. She states:

With this class, the working-class women, though at all times at one with them in point of sympathy from theoretic understanding of their troubles and needs, I was not in direct touch and had no first-hand experiences that I could share with them, I read the petitions of factory workers, of the sweated home workers, of the professions—teachers, nurses, medical women—with respect and whole-hearted sympathy, but how could I stand for them when I was not equipped to represent them? (*Prisons and Prisoners* 80)

Though she knew well about the harsh realities that these working women faced by reading petitions about them, she had no first-hand experience she could share with them. However, when she heard the taunt, ‘Go home and do your washing’, for the first time with her own ears, it immediately conjured up the following vivid image of devastated women:

The gnarled hands, the bent backs, the tear-dimmed eyes of those that had washed them white seemed to cry out, ‘Remember us. Don’t be afraid to speak for us if you get through to the presence of those who know nothing, heed nothing of our toil,’ I said in my heart, ‘I shall remember, and I shall not be afraid in their presence.’ (81)

She renewed her resolution, and the indignation aroused by the violent treatment she had received cured all her fears. She was arrested and imprisoned, but she never regretted what she had done. This is what she says:

The wish was strong in me to have personal experience of the inflictions which a Liberal Government thought suitable to woman Suffragists, to share every incident of the treatment which my leaders and friends had suffered in our cause and to gain some experiences of prison life from within for the sake of one day being equipped to work for prison reforms. (117)

Lytton wanted to know the realities of prison life from within and to share the suffering with her comrades. It is possible that her interest in prison reform was partly evoked by her great-grandmother, whom Mulvey-Roberts states to have been ‘an advocate of prison reform, worked with the poor and underfed,’ and ‘had been forced to leave her home in Guernsey in 1816 owing to a deficit in the island’s finances of £20,000, which she channelled into poor relief’ (169).

Having refused to profit from any privileges proposed to her, she shared a precious moment with fellow prisoners and a wardress as follows:

An unwonted expression of happiness beamed from the fire-lit faces of these prison-clad individuals, drawn together from many parts of the country and from widely-differing walks

of life. Each one contributed her share to our spontaneous entertainment. Even the wardress, completely casting aside her official manner and addressing herself deferentially to Mrs. Lawrence, for whom she had a great admiration, told a pathetic little story with a surprising gift of narration and concentrated expression. (*Prisons and Prisoners* 158)

Then Mrs. Lawrence, one of the leaders of the WSPU, told the story written by Olive Schreiner. As stated above, Lytton met Schreiner in 1892, after which Lytton read her works. Later Schreiner dedicated her most influential work, *Woman and Labour* (1911), to Lytton. The suffragettes and Schreiner seem to have felt strong empathy for each other.

She then repeated Olive Schreiner's "Three Dreams in a Desert." I had read this allegory many years ago when it was first published. ... I read them many times for sheer emotional joy, but their meaning had evidently not penetrated to me. Olive Schreiner, more than any one other author, has rightly interpreted the woman's movement and symbolised and immortalised it by her writings. Now after even so short an experience of the movement as I had known, this "Dream" seemed scarcely an allegory. The words hit out a bare literal description of the pilgrimage of women. (159)

By sharing various experiences from their time in prison, the ties that bound them were strengthened further.

4. The horror of forcible feeding

The first forcible feeding of imprisoned suffragettes took place in September 1909. In October, Emmeline Pankhurst took Constance Lytton with her to a nursing home in Birmingham to visit the girl who had been the first to be released after the hunger strike and forced feeding. The girl, who had been force-fed for a month, narrated her story very simply, giving only the bare facts and nothing more; Pankhurst then cross-examined her and elicited some of the horrors of her time in jail. For several days, the girl's face haunted Lytton, and she resolved not to let the girl and other suffragettes go through it alone and to make her protest with a stone. She said to a fellow suffragette as follows:

'Think of the women who work with sweated wage, who have not the energy to rebel, who are cloaked with poverty; the thousands who, stricken with poverty more hideous than we can think of on one side, and tempted with money on the other, sink into a life of shame, which is endured for five or six years, till death releases them. Think of Lloyd George, whose speech is always fair but who carefully prevents anything being done for women. Think of the women who have hunger-struck as a fresh protest and who now have been fed by force. Then throw your stone and make it do its work.' (*Prisons and Prisoners* 195)

According to Christina Croft, in December 1909, two young working-class women, Selina Martin and Leslie Hall, were arrested for throwing an empty bottle into a car and force-fed. When she resisted, Martin ‘was handcuffed and thrown onto the floor of her cell, before being dragged by the hair up the stairs to the medical room where the procedure was to take place. When it was over, she was carried down the stairs head-first so that her face bumped on each of the stone steps’ (107-08). Hall was equally roughly treated. In contrast with the harsh treatment of these working-class women, though Lytton was imprisoned and went on a hunger strike, she was released without being force-fed because of her powerful connections.

Then, to test the existence of class differences in the treatment of imprisoned suffragettes, Lytton disguised herself as a working-class woman, Jane Warton, for a protest in Liverpool. She was imprisoned in Walton Gaol, went on hunger strike, and was force-fed eight times before her release. In her memoir, she describes the process in detail and exposes the barbarity and inhumanity as follows.

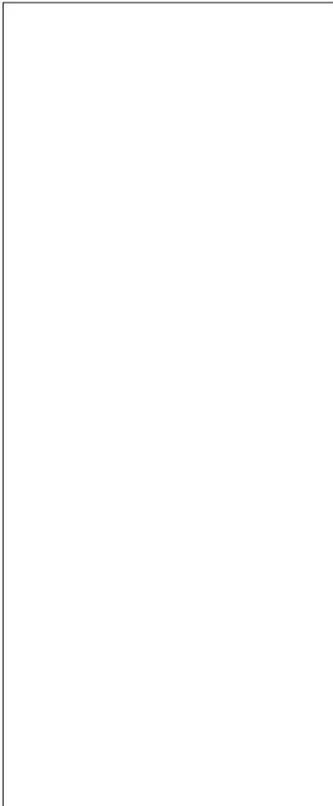


Figure 6
Jane Warton
The Project Gutenberg EBook of
Prisons & Prisoners, by Constance
Lytton, p.234.



Figure 7
Feeding was forced on suffragettes who went on hunger strike in jail.
(BBC)

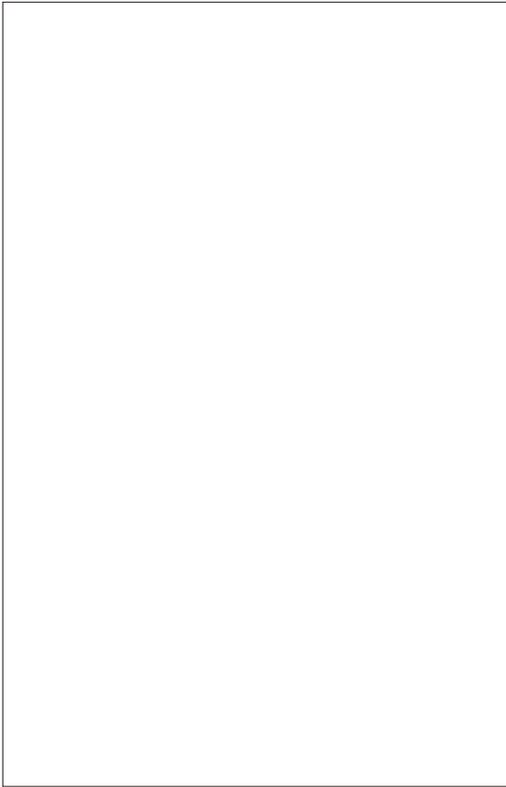


Figure 8
Suffragettes were forcibly fed by prison authorities.
(Museum of London)

The next day, Friday, January 21, as I was being fed—the wardress had given up holding me—the pain of the tube in my body was more than I could bear; I seized hold of it and pulled it up. The wardresses reproved me for interfering, but they did not put the tube in again; the doctor said nothing. I was overwhelmed with the horror of the process, and for the first time I was convulsed with sobs. The doctor was kind to me. I said that I only cried from having no strength to resist, but that I meant to live out my sentence if I could. (248)

She vomited repeatedly. Her body was severely tortured and seriously damaged, but she did not reveal her true identity because she wanted to help women like Jane Warton. Immediately after the first forced feeding, she had an out-of-body experience, which she describes as follows:

Then suddenly I saw Jane Warton lying before me, and it seemed as if I were outside of her. She was the most despised, ignorant and helpless prisoner that I had seen. When she had served her time and was out of the prison, no one would believe anything she said, and the doctor when he had fed her by force and tortured her body, struck her on the cheek to show how he despised her! That was Jane Warton, and I had come to help her. (237)

To bring the cruelty of forced feeding and the class differences in the treatment of imprisoned suffragettes to the public's attention, she bravely endured the intolerable sufferings caused by being forcibly fed.

Lytton was also tormented by the sounds of her fellow suffragette, Elsie Howey, being tortured by the forced feeding. She writes:

Before long I heard the sounds of the forced feeding in the next cell to mine. It was almost more than I could bear; it was Elsie Howey, I was sure. When the ghastly process was over and all quiet, I tapped on the wall and called out at the top of my voice, which wasn't much just then, 'No surrender.' After this I fell back and lay as I fell. (238)

With all her remaining strength, Lytton tried to let Howey know she was not alone and encouraged her comrade as well as herself not to surrender.

Perhaps having detected her disguise, the prison doctor urged Lytton to give up, saying she was 'delicate' and was not fit for the forced feeding.

He then pleaded with me, saying in a beseeching voice, 'I do beg of you—I appeal to you, not as a prison doctor but as a man—to give over. You are a delicate woman, you are not fit for this sort of thing'. I answered, 'Is anybody fit for it? And I beg of you—I appeal to you, not as a prisoner but as a woman—to give over and refuse to continue this inhuman treatment.' (241)

Her cutting remark 'Is anybody fit for it?' criticises the doctor's class distinctions bitterly. She also dauntlessly blamed the prison's governor. She questioned him on whose authority the forced feeding was done. Lytton believed it was not the individual personalities of the prison officials but the incorrect prison system that instilled contempt for the prisoners in it that had to be blamed. She protested to the magistrates as follows:

I said I had been unable to ascertain on whose authority it was done; if by the order of an individual it seemed to me cruel and abominable; but if by order of the departmental authority, and in the name of law, I thought it much worse; then it was sheer barbarism, for under cover of such an order, kindly and well-meaning subordinates were made to assist, for the sake of duty, in the performance of many things which they would never tolerate under different circumstances. (249)

She clearly understood where the responsibility lay, and fearlessly demanded the redressal of the injustice of the government.

5. Conclusion

When Constance Lytton was released from Walton Gaol, her sister Lady Emily Lutyens, who had taken the train to Liverpool at midnight to meet her, wrote to their sister Betty Balfour that Constance's face was worn and her body was 'just like the pictures of famine people in India' (quoted in Croft 112). They had spent much of their childhood in India, where their father Robert was the first Viceroy, and in 1877, 'he had proclaimed Queen Victoria to be Empress of India' (Mulvey-Roberts 163). Although Constance never mentions India in her memoir, Lady Emily Lutyens's use of metaphor of 'famine people in India' suggests the family's deep connection with India and colonialism.

Constance Lytton's story caused a sensation, and most newspapers understood the reason for her disguise. Craft points out that the different treatment she had received as an aristocrat and as the seamstress Jane Warton 'raised such a furore that the matter was discussed in Parliament' (112). In

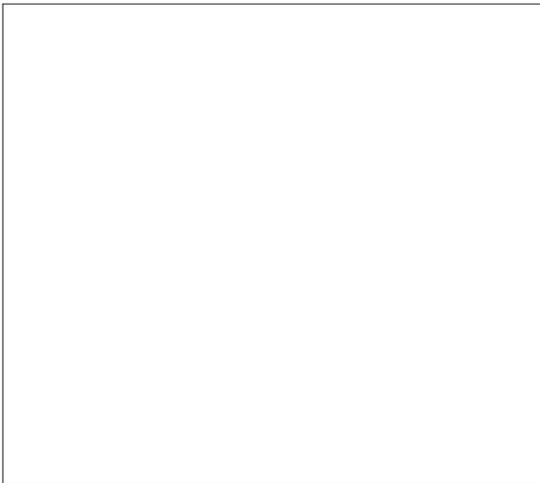


Figure 9
Robert's time as Viceroy of India was personally and professionally very difficult.
Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr
(Biteback Publishing, 2015, p. 132.)

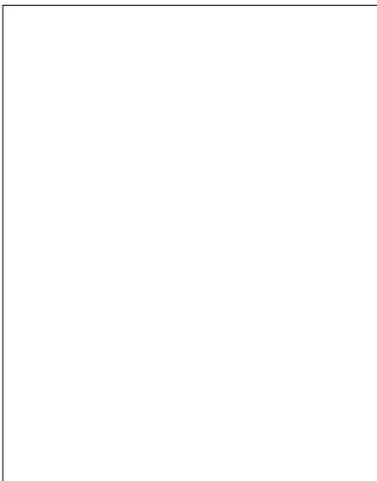


Figure 10
After her stroke, Constance was confined to bed and unable to write; her friends clubbed together to buy her this typewriter.
Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr
(Biteback Publishing, 2015, p. 132.)



Figure 11

A rare image with a smile; Constance is wearing the medal earned as part of her 'Holloway degree'.

Lady Constance Lytton: Aristocrat, Suffragette, Martyr
(Biteback Publishing, 2015, p. 132.)

a reply to the ministers' detailed letter to *The Times* insisting that there were no grounds for a fuller investigation, her brother Lord Lytton also defended her and exposed the inconsistency of their claims.

In 1914, Constance published her memoir *Prisons and Prisoners*, informing the world of the bare facts of forcible feeding. Her fearless, brave, compassionate action touched many people's heartstrings. In her autobiography, published in the same year, Emmeline Pankhurst 'pays special tribute to Constance' (Mulvey-Roberts 159). Even strangers felt that Constance's sacrifice and sufferings had been endured for them. For instance, one woman, who had never met her, writes that she felt a 'deep impulse of gratitude and love' for her (Mulvey-Roberts 162).

To conclude, Constance Lytton's *Prisons and Prisoners* is her memoir as well as her manifesto. By vividly describing her awakening as a suffragette, her militant acts, arrests, and forced feeding in jail, she demonstrated not only the suffragettes' shared cause, zeal, and hardships but also her own thoughts and personal experiences. Making it clear in her book that the personal is political, she succeeded in promoting the women's suffrage movement.

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