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## The Political Stitch: Voicing Resistance in a Suffrage Textile

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**The Political Stitch: Voicing Resistance in a Suffrage Textile**

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*Out of the little group of half a dozen women who used to meet in a room in Manchester has emerged the movement which has shaken the whole fabric of politics.*

A.G. Gardiner<sup>1</sup>

*To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.*

Rozsika Parker<sup>2</sup>

While on a hunger strike within the walls of Britain's Holloway Prison in 1912, a woman recorded her experience in an embroidered handkerchief. Her deliberate stitching not only presents us with an intimate artifact that embodies individual experience but a pivotal collective moment in Western women's history. As one of the imprisoned militants, Janie Terrero created a textile imbued with political importance. The textile, created under extenuating circumstances, engages us with her act to resist, petition and memorialize in her struggle for a political voice for herself and womankind.

A number of surviving Holloway embroideries juxtapose the 'delicate' domestic skill of embroidery with the grim reality of oppressive prison terms for political action. Embedded within the textiles of the embroiderers, once dismissed as irrational bourgeois women engaged in unseemly antics, was a coalescing political force. Cognizant of the power of symbolism, women employed their amateur craft skills crossing class boundaries to propel the struggle for the vote for women onto the public stage. It is timely to examine these purposeful acts of 1912 on their centenary as a response to converging historical, social and political factors that resonate still.

Through personal examination of a number of suffrage textiles housed in the Museum of London, interviews with their curator and reference to often opposed historical view points, this interdisciplinary study promotes the efficacy of textiles to construct 'voice' and augment a history that has too often discounted women's experience. Accounts of Edwardian women marching in the streets of London are abundant, therefore, the Terrero embroidery which has captivated this writer is used here as the central thread around which to explore less celebrated details. Sufficient social and political context is presented to frame its analysis for an international reader.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Fulford, *Votes for Women: the story of a struggle*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957, 215.

<sup>2</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine*. New York: Routledge, 1987, Forward.

## The Patient Suffragist

The historical view of the imprisonment of women such as Terrero (and some men) in the twentieth century in a struggle for women's enfranchisement was once considered in isolation. It is now placed within a wider radical political tradition of nineteenth century Britain.<sup>3</sup> By the 1950s the early narrow view of the tumultuous events of the new century were reappraised as not merely 'a fad' enacted by 'a few wealthy and leisured ladies'.<sup>4</sup> Most recent historical analyses point out that concepts of citizenship and protest were grounded in decades of enacting grievances on other issues which underpinned actions in the new century.<sup>5</sup> Suffragists or constitutionalists (men and women seeking to expand enfranchisement) *expected* to engage the state via the rule of law. Through notions of fair play they hoped to convince their government of their cause through petitioning, lobbying and demonstrating.<sup>6</sup> These traditions are imbedded in Janie Terrero's textile.

The political process to expand voting privileges beyond select members of the male population, under way since the 1860s, proved disheartening. The catalog of arguments offered by male parliamentarians resistant to votes for women was reduced to one by 1912, superior physical strength.<sup>7</sup> Variations on this included the notion that laws were enforced by the strength of men and that it was unpalatable that women should play a role in lawmaking which could, feasibly, include decisions to send men to war.<sup>8</sup> Although there was considerable intellectual support for enfranchising women, with over 50 bills presented to Parliament in London from 1867, it did not translate into success<sup>9</sup>. As historian Roger Fulford put it in 1957, ... "the fate of these suffrage bills was monotonously frustrating, for the principles at the heart of every woman's suffrage bill had been constantly lost in the labyrinth of procedure or of party manoeuvre".<sup>10</sup> By the time Janie Terrero was creating her stitched 'petition', a bloc within the suffrage movement had supplanted patient lobbying with direct action that flouted the law.

Among the many aspiring voices in the suffrage movement, the politically active Terrero chose the militant one. Women's groups operating in 1912 voiced their common concerns grounded in earlier feminist demands; the inability of women to protect themselves, their children and their property before the law.<sup>11</sup> The many groups desirous of the parliamentary vote were momentarily unified in 1906 by the over reaction of authority to the challenge of more militant protest. The mass arrests and harsh treatment created martyrs in a cause which gained prominence in the news, swelling the numbers marching for the vote from 3000-4000 in 1907 to one quarter million in 1908.<sup>12</sup> It is at this point that Janie Terrero, a suffragist since the 1870s, was moved to join the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU) and form a branch in Pinner (Northwest of London). Where the factions, with their shared aim to be fully

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<sup>3</sup> Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The militant suffrage movement: citizenship and resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2003, 70.

<sup>4</sup> Fulford, 121.

<sup>5</sup> Mayhall, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Mayhall, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Mayhall, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Fulford, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Storey and Molly Housego, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*. Oxford: Shire Publications, 2012, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Fulford, 280.

<sup>11</sup> Mayhall, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Fulford, 156, 182.

recognized in the political structures of the future, parted company was in regard to tactics. One plodded on patiently past the 50 year mark while the other had lost patience and was literally ‘burning to vote’.<sup>13</sup>

### The Militant Suffragette



**Figure 1 Janie Terrero's embroidered handkerchief.**  
**Photo courtesy of Museum of London (Image # 218153).**

At the top of Janie Terrero’s embroidery worked in a London prison (figure 1) she references prominently the WSPU identifying her membership in the militant faction of the suffrage movement. Although London became the central ‘theatre’ for suffrage action, Emmeline Pankhurst first formed her group in Manchester proclaiming, “we shall work not by means of any outworn missionary methods but by political action”.<sup>14</sup> The *Daily Mail* in 1906 coined the term ‘Suffragette’ intended as a belittlement to distinguish between the law abiding suffragists and the militant wing. WSPU strategy was distinguished by a sense of media savvy and an apparent knack for ingenious taunting, bordering on farce. Determined to be ignored no longer, they targeted any proceedings based on male authority as worthy of disruption. Tactics to make their cause visible included hiding among church organ pipes to emerge shouting

<sup>13</sup> Fulford, 280.

<sup>14</sup> Fulford, 119.

slogans and unfurling banners, renting a boat to taunt Members of Parliament with a megaphone as they took their tea on the parliamentary terrace, clamoring over rooftops in view of ‘serious’ male only meetings, being lowered through skylights of public buildings and sailing overhead in hot air balloons, all evoking performance and spectacle.<sup>15</sup>

As Janie Terrero undertook overt political action she could count on a formidable organization behind her. For many women, of all ages and social standings, ‘going public’ was a new intimidating experience. Activities considered ‘immodest’ included demonstrating, marching, speaking from street corners and making forays to public meetings and the House of Commons all of which could lead to arrest and imprisonment or at least jeers from ‘louts’ and ‘hooligans’.<sup>16</sup> Events started to draw enormous crowds whose composition is described as 80% curious, 10% sympathetic and 10% hostile.<sup>17</sup> Facing hecklers or aggressive jostling, the street action of Suffragettes was supported by shops set up by the WSPU operating as organizing centres and providing such practical aids as pamphlets with ‘arguing points’ so that in any social or legal interaction, the Suffragette could shape an argument.<sup>18</sup> Given what we know of Terrero, she would likely have been *offering* support.



***Figure 2 Janie Terrero, Courtesy of Museum of London (Image # 415845) after 1912.***

Janie Terrero (1858-1944) (figure 2) was not a key figure in the leadership of the WSPU but an active supporter in the ‘rank and file’. Through her textiles and letters to her husband that are preserved in the *Museum of London*, she helps ‘clothe’ women’s history of this period. At the time she embroidered the handkerchief, Terrero was in her fifties. An accomplished musical composer married to an Argentinian, she was living a comfortable life in Essex and enjoyed croquet as her pleasurable pastime. To this extent

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<sup>15</sup> Fulford, 181, 192, 199, 307, Storey, 18, and Lisa Tickner, *The spectacle of women: imagery of the suffrage campaign, 1907-14*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 56.

<sup>16</sup> June Purvis, *Doing Feminist Women's History: Researching the Lives of Women in the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian England*. Bristol: Taylor & Francis, 1994, 168.

<sup>17</sup> Fulford, 199.

<sup>18</sup> Mayhall 71

she is in keeping with the stereotypical Suffragette, once dismissed as bourgeois (and easily excitable) women engaged in immodest public displays.

In reality a broad spectrum of women participated in the quest for enfranchisement. Terrero, unlike many militants who were single, working and of modest means<sup>19</sup>, was well positioned. Although care must be taken not to read too much into the Terrero marriage, it seems an equitable affair with Janie informing her husband in a spirited manner in her letters from prison of her progress in her goal to be arrested and charged. That she is neither entreating nor apologetic is a contrast to political cartoons of the day that depict homes of absent suffragettes and their baffled and annoyed husbands. The politically active couple of apparent means, and unified aims had a long history of helping in causes close to their hearts. They chaired meetings and provided their home to encourage political and social reform.<sup>20</sup> A suffragist from the age of 18, Janie Terrero was galvanized by the events of 'Black Friday' in 1910 that saw many campaigners accuse police of assault to ultimately seek arrest March 1, 1912, the date inscribed on the embroidered handkerchief.

The state of mind of the Suffragette leadership further contextualizes the pivotal year of 1912. Emmeline Pankhurst's unstinting leadership abilities had mobilized thousands of women in support of the WSPU. Long before laws were broken, WSPU policy was grounded in daughter Christabel Pankhurst's provocative questioning of the judiciary based on her law degree. The Pankhursts' first focus had been to try to rectify what was seen as a misinterpretation of the law that excluded women and they would have been satisfied if the *principle* of women's enfranchisement with a partial vote had been granted [as in Australia in 1904].<sup>21</sup> With all efforts failing to budge Parliament, the move to violence was by degree. By the pivotal year of 1912 Christabel was called 'Queen of the Mob' and wanted by police. Now fully committed to a violent campaign the leadership of mother and daughter had broken with their moderate backers and initiated the final phase of militancy.

That women turned to textiles in the intense days of demonstration, marching and increasingly serious confrontation with the law in 1912 as part of a long orchestrated struggle for enfranchisement, imbues them with significance. Suffragists, including moderate Constitutionalists who had emphasized the use of embroidery, used textiles in support of the cause.<sup>22</sup> In using silk and velvet associated with the drawing room and working in embroidery and appliqué associated with the feminine, they succeeded in using amateur craft identified with a chaste and domestic femininity to mount a political challenge that sought short term political gain and long term social change.<sup>23</sup>

As Janie Terrero stitched, she was serving a four month sentence for breaking a window, her first ever conflict with the law as one of several hundred Suffragettes who had undertaken a window smashing campaign.<sup>24</sup> In this action, almost every shop window around Piccadilly Circus was broken using stones or 'toffee hammers' easily concealed in muffs or up a sleeve. Janie Terrero, as one of 200 imprisoned, followed precedent and 'scornfully refused' fines to purposefully instigate imprisonment; this simultaneously cohered the movement and unleashed a Machiavellian response from the government.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> June Purvis, The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain. *Women's History Review*, 1995, 4 (1), 114.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, *The women's suffrage movement: a reference guide, 1866-1928*. London: UCL Press, 1999, 683.

<sup>21</sup> Crawford, 727.

<sup>22</sup> Fulford, 80

<sup>23</sup> Tickner, 62, 69, Introduction.

<sup>24</sup> Beverley Cook, Curator, Social & Working History, Museum of London, Personal Communication, April 19, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Fulford, 143, 144.

## WSPU – Courting a State Response

Arrests were not exclusive to the militant wing, but in keeping with WSPU strategy court appearances offered members a theatre to argue a woman's right to challenge a democracy resting on the votes of a select portion of the male population. Escalating vandalism was required to maintain the spotlight on this challenge. Extreme forms of militancy came into play from 1912 with attacks on public buildings, art treasures and post boxes culminating in extensive arson attacks. Although the express intention was to never endanger human life, militants were divided as to how far to take their resistance.<sup>26</sup> Some averred violent tactics but avoided criticizing the WSPU.<sup>27</sup> A minority undertook terrorism in the form of arson and bombing that was rejected by the vast majority. For her part, Janie Terrero set her sights on the windows of an engineering firm and faced the consequences in court.

In her letter to her husband of March 5, 1912, Janie Terrero indicated that she would refuse bail. Her sentence to a prison term, and the 9 months assigned the leaders of the window smashing action, was a reflection of a non-comprehending state. In addition, the swathe of sympathetic public was diminished by widespread indignation at the window smashing which had extended to the Prime Minister's residence. Sentences, it is claimed, were delivered by elderly, patronizing and contemptuous judges.<sup>28</sup> Terrero clearly points a finger at *her* judge, naming him in stitches that proclaim "sentenced by Judge Lawrie on Wednesday March 27<sup>th</sup> to four months". Some inmates continued to resist the force of the state by communicating from prison. Writing paper was sometimes not allowed but needle and thread seem to have escaped notice. Given the brutality of enforced authority visited on prisoners who had committed non-criminal acts, it seems reasonable that the embroideries were not examined for subversion or they would not have survived.

## Stitching Resistance in Prison

Janie Terrero was among over 1,000 women and about 40 men incarcerated due to suffrage activities from 1905 to the First World War.<sup>29</sup> On arrival to Holloway, the dreary dungeon of a prison which interned both suffragists and militants, the newly imprisoned immediately protested their classification as common criminals rather than political prisoners or 'misdemeanants' who would have been held in better quarters with fewer restrictions.<sup>30</sup> Treatment within the 'divisions' proved to be inconsistent. The moderate women's league members were usually treated with restraint and the WSPU militants more harshly.<sup>31</sup> In some cases titled and well connected women were treated preferentially.<sup>32</sup> Countess Lytton had proved this with her second much harsher imprisonment disguised as much humbler seamstress 'Jane Warton', embarrassing the government. In spite of her middle class standing Terrero appears to have faced the full impact of a prison experience.

Her physical resistance to prison authority began from the outset as Janie Terrero details in her letter home, ... "we were put into our cells by force and then broke our cell windows and everything that we

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<sup>26</sup> Storey, 39 and Purvis, 1994, 169.

<sup>27</sup> Mayhall, 105. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Fulford, 150.

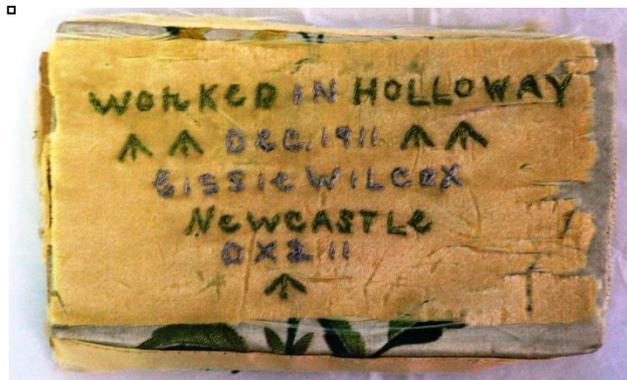
<sup>29</sup> Purvis, 1994, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Mayhall, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Mayhall, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Purvis, 1995, 120.

could...”<sup>33</sup> She went on hunger strike twice, was fed by force and released when the prison doctor called a halt a few days before her four month sentence was up.<sup>34</sup> In prison the activist’s stitched resistance to silence, propriety and powerlessness was built upon preceding textiles of prisoners who recorded earlier experiences of incarceration. Embroiderers appear to have used simple on hand resources and possibly materials gathered from visitors to create both unsophisticated and more elaborate communications.



*Figure 3 Cissie Wilcox’s embroidery panel courtesy of the Museum of London (ID no:50.82/1231).  
Photo by author.*

One such piece (Figure 3) examined in the Museum of London, is the simple yet powerful small [fits in palm of hand] embroidery of Cissie Wilcox which bears witness to her sentence from direct action in Newcastle the previous year. Its record of prison name, cell block ‘D’ and the prison arrow symbol are echoed later in Terrero’s own work. A second embroidered white cotton handkerchief affectionately honours and thanks Janie Terrero. Curator Beverley Cook notes “I have come to the conclusion that it was sent to her as a thank you for a donation of a Christmas hamper she sent to the women prisoners in December 1911. I think it is probable that the signatures on the handkerchief were the recipients of her generosity”. (Figure 4) The symbols chosen were those of a supportive network of Suffragists, within and without the walls of Holloway Prison. Clearly the association of women who embroider to enact goodness, meekness and obedience as described by Rozsika Parker<sup>35</sup> is subverted in these pieces, a goal not lost on the prisoner who imbues her stitches with political purpose.

Terrero’s prison embroidery, Parker notes, joined a female tradition of embroidering guests’ signatures commemorating a social visit or special occasion to the act of political dissent where the signatures become “gestures of solidarity and protest”.<sup>36</sup> The handkerchief itself chosen by Janie Terrero as the base for her embroidered *communiqué*, references other textile traditions of women. As fashion accessory and intimate memento, once inscribed with stitches and bestowed with importance as an object of memory, the handkerchief fulfills further purposes beyond the ubiquitous hankie in terms of memorial, documentation and manifested resistance. It is also reminiscent of ‘signature cloth’, English and American needlework and quilts from the 1850s that functioned as social networking with remembrances of friends, family and community where fading signatures now poignantly record women’s relationships.<sup>37</sup> Cognizant of the use of embroidery within the suffrage movement and fervent

<sup>33</sup> Fulford , 250.

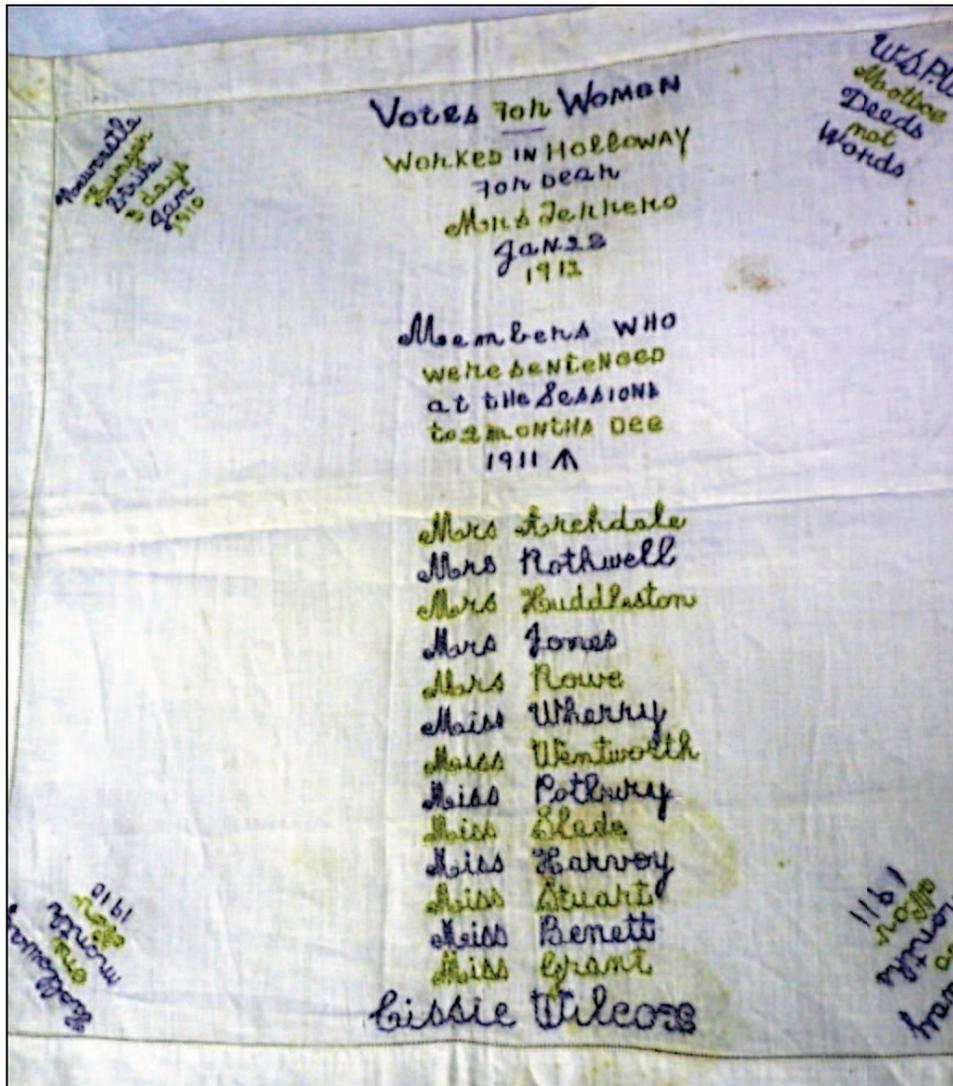
<sup>34</sup> Crawford, 684.

<sup>35</sup> Parker, 174

<sup>36</sup> Parker, 191

<sup>37</sup> Lynn Settrington, Signed and sealed: signature cloths; social networking old and new. *Selvedge*, 46, May/June, 2012, 58.

in her WSPU commitment, the embroiderer is thorough in the documentation of her own encounter with the state.



*Figure 4 Embroidered handkerchief given to Janie Terrero, 1911. Museum of London. Photo by author.*

The form of Janie Terrero’s embroidery is redolent of domesticity; presumably neither the “hankie” nor the tools of embroidery were denied the prisoner as, in the context of tradition, they evoke the feminine.<sup>38</sup> In the still emerging accounts of imprisonment in Holloway, there are particulars that support this. After four weeks of imprisonment, Purvis found, women were allowed to leave dismal cells to “take their needlework or knitting to the hall downstairs, which was more airy, and sit side by side, although talking was still forbidden”.<sup>39</sup> It was likely assumed that these women were performing a more ladylike task than the protests that put them in gaol. By embroidering a record of the hunger strike and

38 Eileen Wheeler, *Engaging Women's History Through Textiles: Enhancing Curricula With Narratives Of Historical Memory*, Unpublished thesis in Curriculum Studies, University of British Columbia, 2005, 104.

39 Purvis, 1995, 109.

its personal violations apparently under the noses of the authorities, the violence of the incarceration becomes visible for a future audience.

At the outset, Janie Terrero identifies her association with the WSPU placing its motto at the top of the handkerchief. This prominence reaffirms the actions imprisoned women had taken to further their demands for the vote such as sabotage, stone throwing, marching, inviting arrest and the refusal of food, all exemplifying their “Deeds not Words” motto centred at the top of the work. Repetition of the motto possibly strengthened resolve or had a motivational purpose for her intended audience. A number of symbols regularly used in suffrage literature and art are employed here. Uppermost is a line drawn in thread of the 40 pane cell window typical of Holloway Prison. A similar shape with rounded top is immediately below the motto; it is a portcullis indicating the House of Commons, the ultimate symbol of resistance to the state. The heraldic broad arrow, the traditional tag of ‘government property’ which appeared on their prison uniform, reinforces the imprisoned status of the embroiderers. The ‘toffee hammers,’ used to commit window smashing offences, are featured on either side of the state’s portcullis. (As a symbol the hammer was worn as a brooch with pride by Suffragettes). The embroidery’s content is framed by a tri-coloured WSPU satin ribbon, a presentation which suggests it is a kind of testimonial that memorializes what has transpired in prison.

White and green had been the constant colours of all suffrage societies; the WSPU added purple. The wealthy social activists the Pethick-Lawrences, in addition to their financial backing, had thrown the full weight of their marketing and business acumen behind WSPU events. With their strategy of making a full visual impact, the corporate colours of the WSPU were revealed for the first time in the massive spectacle of the Women’s Sunday Procession and Rally in London in 1908.<sup>40</sup> In one incident King George was scandalized in September, 1911 to find all the flags on his private golf course had been changed in the night to purple, white and green.<sup>41</sup> Strategically chosen as symbols, purple indicated loyalty to king and cause, white signified dignity and purity and green indicated hope.<sup>42</sup> Banners, dress of participants and an array of products from brooches to bicycles produced by sympathetic businesses reinforced the imagery<sup>43</sup> and provided a sense of identity to draw on during hardship.

The hunger strike remains clearly identified with militant suffrage a century later and is an integral part of the political content of this embroidery. The tactic to refuse food was not initiated by the WSPU leadership but was adopted subsequent to sensational media coverage that followed the first instance. The listing of Janie Terrero’s suffrage sisters interned in cell block DX pointedly distinguishes those who were fed by force whereby women (and a few men) were restrained and fed forcefully through nasal tubes causing great pain (some over 130 times.<sup>44</sup> Euphemistically called “artificial feeding” it was not viewed as dangerous, a view held by historian Roger Fulford writing in the 1950s. Forcible feeding was rationalized as saving the lives of resistant prisoners and avoiding potential charges of manslaughter against the state.<sup>45</sup> A somewhat panicked government forced through an Act which became known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’ to free women before they were dangerously ill, only to re-arrest them days later when they were stronger. Some women had problems in later life with subsequent strokes attributed to their treatment and Mrs. Pankhurst, imprisoned and released ten times, had a shortened life

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<sup>40</sup> Storey, 22

<sup>41</sup> Fulford, 271.

<sup>42</sup> Tickner, 265.

<sup>43</sup> Storey, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Purvis, 1995, 115.

<sup>45</sup> Purvis, 1994, 169.

likely due to hunger striking.<sup>46</sup> The forced feeding, in Janie Terrero's own words were intended "to terrorise and torture".<sup>47</sup> In a medium associated with meekness Janie Terrero records the horrific listing the 20 women of her cell block D, including herself, who were fed by force as a record of overzealous authority and its degradations visited on individual women.

At the centre of her oversized silk and wool fine quality handkerchief, encased in an oval of delicate vine like floral embroidery is the stark statement of facts of the incarceration, the naming of Holloway Prison and the clear expression of the identity of the maker. Close inspection indicates individual signatures possibly crafted by those named or perhaps stitched over a penned original by Terrero in the long weeks of internment. The signature list is both a nod to the past civic tradition of the petition and a statement of solidarity with the other prisoners. In this sense she may have stitched also for the gaze of her peers. Citing names gave recognition to hunger strikers and those fed by force, including Janie Terrero, who added her bold signature a second time to this list. The militants had a pattern of celebrating the courage and sacrifice of hunger strikers in print, processions and badges worn by them once released. This embroidery functions as a poster to further articulate WSPU goals.

### **Ode to the Leaders**

The embroidery also acts as a shrine to the militant WSPU leadership that was entirely in the hands of the Pankhursts. Early on Emmeline Pankhurst, cognizant of the decades of division that encumbered progress in other suffrage organizations, squashed attempts to introduce a democratic structure to the WSPU. Her autocratic approach lent stability to her organization; those without unquestioning loyalty gravitated to other groups<sup>48</sup>. Janie Terrero's loyalty is demonstrated in her letter to her husband upon arrest. In keeping with WSPU strategies she described how she and other suffrage prisoners resisted prison officials who had tried to prevent them from conferring with Mrs. Pankhurst. She elaborates, "...we only took our meal on Sunday evening after receiving her instructions that we were to eat... We obey her absolutely."<sup>49</sup> At some point, a photographic image of Emmeline and Christabel, a WSPU postcard, is affixed to the base of Terrero's embroidery as homage to her venerated leaders.

With her own stitching of "Mrs. Pankhursts Bold Bad Ones" Janie Terrero reinforces the heroine status accorded the leader and the pride taken in doing her bidding by the rank and file of the militant movement. In fact "almost a mass hysteria" notes Museum of London's Curator of Social History, Beverly Cook, existed among devoted followers reaching its apogee with the 'Young Hotbloods'. Inspired by Christabel, and assigned her special missions, they exhibited extreme loyalty beyond notions of politics.<sup>50</sup> The new levels of sabotage created a schism in the movement and loss of the financial and managerial support of the Pethick-Lawrences. Janie Terrero refused to sign a petition in support of the ousted couple, indicating that her loyalty was unwavering. Although she gave prominence to their leadership she mindfully places the Pankhursts' names in the company of less recognized women who withstood hardship to advance a cause.

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<sup>46</sup> Purvis, 1995, 105 and Storey, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Maureen Daly Goggin, *Fabricating Identity in Women and things, 1750-1950 : gendered material strategies*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009., 30.

<sup>48</sup> Storey, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Fulford, 250.

<sup>50</sup> Cook, June 2012.

## The Political Stitch

Terrero's signature embroidery is most effective as a challenge to political power in its overt assertion of identity. It stands in defiance of the efforts to strip prisoners of their personal identities and prevent them from associating. Unlike some who were allowed street clothes and other prison privileges, militants wore prison garb, were identified by number and often prevented from communicating. Janie Terrero placed herself in the centre of the handkerchief stitching her name in her own exuberant hand, voicing and preserving the identity of its maker and flanking it with those who shared in a common commitment and the extreme privation it wrought. Suffrage embroidery such as this, with its clearly intended symbolic content, was a sophisticated and calculated instrument to counter propaganda aimed at the 'hysterical sisterhood' of suffragists.<sup>51</sup> From a position of powerlessness, these women dismissed as being of no political consequence, protested silently by adding their names to Terrero's textile document to expressly craft political resistance; this expression of agency served to cohere and sustain a collective identity.

Lisa Tickner observed that in the act of presenting their work for the public gaze suffrage art and textiles were shaping by a sense of identity in women. The handkerchief that embodies this identification references the past and anticipates a future audience. The deep commitment to achieve political status is evident in these stitches and letter writing where allowed. Given the restrictions on writing paper (one suffragette wrote surreptitiously on the dark brown lavatory paper)<sup>52</sup> embroidery provided another avenue, possibly overlooked by wardens. They share a common purpose as acts of solidarity and commemoration.

## Historical perspective – Textiles in women's History

In the ongoing re-visioning of history, the struggle for the vote for women in the Western world is still important and contested ground. Whether suffrage militancy hastened or prolonged the struggle for the vote is still debated<sup>53</sup> However, rather than an historical anomaly, an accepted historical perspective now views the ferment of the Suffragette years as a culmination of a political history that led to direct action by suffragettes to confront the law. In spite of partial votes for women in Great Britain in 1918 and fully in 1928, it became apparent in the inter war years that the hopes for women's advancement embodied in the suffrage struggle had not been fully realized.<sup>54</sup> As contemporary feminism tries to determine the path to the present, suffrage textiles imbued with history and meaning augment new approaches to history furnishing details from its margins to further delineate women's lives.

Over the number of decades that suffragette history has been analyzed, it is the focus on the demonstrations and the trials to women's bodies that has concentrated attention. This, historian Laura Nym Mayhall warns oversimplifies a complex movement to construct a political identity. With the dominant visual images from this period projecting powerlessness [women held down for feeding or being carried bodily by burly policemen], recent feminist analyses work to restore agency to women of this period making them initiators rather than reactors in their own story. In this, Terrero's handkerchief plays a role as we can focus on an alternative image of empowering resistance.

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<sup>51</sup> Tickner, 192.

<sup>52</sup> Purvis, 1994, 192.

<sup>53</sup> Diane Atkinson, *Funny Girls: Cartooning for Equality*. London: Penguin, 1997. 10 and Fulford, 255.

<sup>54</sup> Purvis, 183.

The textiles employed in the struggle reflected a subversive tradition where women “managed to make meanings of their own in the very medium intended to inculcate self-effacement”.<sup>55</sup> Janie Terrero in articulating in stitches a *do not forget us, do not forget our cause, do not forget me* message aspired to take part in a continuum, a hopeful one for ultimate gender equality. Her embroidery engages us with her act of resistance in a struggle for a political voice for herself and womankind. This singular textile communicates a powerful sense of self and, with its provocative content, a prescient anticipation of a future audience.

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<sup>55</sup> Parker, 215.