

Commitment and Class: Female Working-Class Activists in Three Suffragette Novels

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Abstract

The article examines the relationship between social class and political commitment in three Suffragette novels written by women who were themselves actively engaged in the Women's Social and Political Union. The novels are Elizabeth Robins's *The convert* (1907), Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911) and Constance Elizabeth Maud's *No surrender* (1911). In these fictionalized depictions of Suffragette activism, I argue, it is the female working-class characters that support more politically uncompromising modes of action in the struggle for female emancipation. There is also a narrative progression throughout the three novels which, I claim, dramatizes the clash of personal loyalties and political commitment that reveals more clearly the fundamental contribution of working-class women in what has been previously viewed as a predominantly middle-class movement.

Keywords: Suffragette novels; Elizabeth Robins; Gertrude Colmore; Constance Elizabeth Maud; working class

This article explores the aspect of female working-class activism in three of the most popular Suffragette novels written by women who were themselves active in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)—Elizabeth Robins's *The convert* (1907), Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911) and Constance Elizabeth Maud's *No surrender* (1911). While the Suffragette movement itself had a somewhat ambivalent attitude to working-class militants in its ranks, these three novels place working-class women firmly at the center of their fictional narratives. Moreover, their voices provide not only one of the most distinct literary expressions of female working-class Suffragette experience; their actions also represent a moral touchstone in the fight for women's rights. If these works can be described as examples of activist fiction, it is the female working-class characters that offer the most persuasive reasons for adopting uncompromising modes of action to challenge the power of patriarchal society. I will therefore trace a narrative progression throughout the three novels of working-class women representing more decisive supporters of the Suffragette movement, whose sacrifices

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dramatize the clash of personal loyalties and political commitment in their lives. These three novels need therefore be set against the recurring historical image of the Suffragettes as a mainly middle-class movement in which female working-class activists were either marginalized or written out of the story altogether.

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Ever since the emergence of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903, historians and critics have commented on the neglect that has been shown towards the contribution of working-class women to the Suffragette campaign. In the Preface to her most recent and comprehensive history of the movement, *Rise up women: the remarkable lives of the suffragettes*, Diane Atkinson writes:

For a long time the campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) has been dismissed as a hobby for self-interested middle-class women, but here we read what a large part working-class women played in the struggle for the right of women to vote. Despite danger, considerable suffering and public opprobrium, these women persisted unwaveringly in their aims. (Atkinson 2019: xiii)

A review of earlier histories of the movement reveals a similar need to reinstate working-class women in the narrative in order to remedy the historical condescension that has either written their participation out of the story or seriously underestimated it. In her groundbreaking survey, significantly entitled *Hidden from history: 300 years of women's oppression and the fight against it* (1973), Sheila Rowbotham was one of the first to argue for a more complex appreciation of the social and political forces within the Suffragettes:

It was not a simple question of reactionary middle-class feminists versus enlightened working-class socialists. The political reality of the suffragette movement was both more fluid and more confused than the conventional stereotype.

Subsequent accounts of the suffragette movement have tended to concentrate on the Pankhursts as personalities. This means the actual composition of the movement remains unclear. (Rowbotham 1990: 79)

Despite this, three decades later, Melanie Philips recycles an unequal class dichotomy in the Suffragette movement when she reproduces uncritically a comment by Christabel Pankhurst: 'It was evident that the House of Commons, and even its Labour members, were more impressed by the demonstrations of the feminine bourgeoisie than of the female proletariat'. Philips concludes therefore that Christabel 'turned the WSPU into an upper-class and bourgeois organisation' (Philips 2004: 186). There has moreover been a related trend in histories of the Suffragette movement to establish a north-south divide along sociopolitical lines between a conservative middle-class south and a more radical working-class north. Thus, Barbara Caine claims for example that

the growing political conservatism of the WSPU and its attempts to distance itself from working-class women, combined with the opposition of northern women to violent forms of militancy or to the campaign of deliberately courting arrest, made a separation of the two groups inevitable ... the relations between the northern working women and the London-based middle-class suffrage societies were always difficult and strained because of their lack of common understanding and experience. (Caine 1990: 158).

In an attempt to redress this historical imbalance, Jill Liddington has written two books that document the lives of working-class women who were active in the Suffragette movement in the north of England: *One hand tied behind us; the rise of the women's suffragette movement* (1978) and more recently *Rebel girls: their fight for the vote* (2006). The first study, according to Liddington,

told the tale behind the Pankhurst headlines, the story of the radical suffragettes of Lancashire, women weavers and winders who took their campaign out to factory gate and cottage door. They were women whose confidence to demand the vote for themselves sprang from their jobs in the great cotton mills and from their political experience in the new labour movement. (Liddington 2006: xi-xii)

At the same time, Liddington's research shows a patchwork of overlapping political affiliations:

They championed radical ideas but, increasingly critical of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's tactics as militancy escalated, they

remained suffragettes. Rather than the suffragettes' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) they preferred the constitutional tactics of Mrs Fawcett's great National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. (Liddington 2006: xii)

Liddington's more recent book, *Rebel girls*, seeks to recover the careers of more working-class Suffragettes in neighbouring Yorkshire, although here again her conclusion is that their biographies reveal a group of women activists who were not attracted to the militant actions of the WSPU: '[M]y research across this region has thrown up completely new figures. They are decidedly not the politically-experienced radical suffragettes of Lancashire's cotton towns, but daring 'rebel-girl' suffragettes' (Liddington 2006: xii). Liddington's study remains however rather limited, focusing on only eight such activists, one of whom is Adela Pankhurst, daughter of Emmeline, who happened to be born in Manchester.

This working-class/middle-class, radical/conservative, north/south divide appears therefore still both unclear and under-researched. There is for example one area down south where the WSPU really did acquire a substantial working-class base and that was in the East End of London. This was without doubt the result of the conscious efforts of Sylvia Pankhurst to mobilize women from the working class on a radical programme that included much more than the right to vote. The East London Federation of the WSPU was founded in 1912 and quickly recruited thousands of female members, as Sylvia Pankhurst herself recalled in her own classic history of the movement:

In the East End the poor women of the slums were rushing to the movement as though all their life and their hope depended upon it, spending in and for it every moment that could be snatched from their toil, making innumerable efforts and sacrifices for its sake. A thousand members were quickly enrolled in the small district of North Bow alone. Throughout the East End activity and interest extended far beyond the actual membership. Numbers of women undertook the distribution of literature, canvassing and chalking in the streets where they lived. (Pankhurst 1977: 465)

This combination of feminism and socialism became so successful that the East London Federation was finally expelled from the WSPU in 1914, since the middle-class leadership declared it was against the idea

of a democratic grassroots organisation, favoring instead a rigorously centralized top-down structure. The working-class base of the East End Federation was consequently deemed both too politically radical and unruly. Quite explicitly, Sylvia Pankhurst was told by one WSPU leader:

“A working women’s movement was of no value: working women were the weakest portion of the sex: how could it be otherwise? Their lives were too hard, their education too meager to equip them for the contest ... We want picked women, the very strongest and most intelligent! ... we want all our women to take their instructions and walk in step like an army!” (Pankhurst 1977: 517)

Faced with this class prejudice, Sylvia Pankhurst went on to reorganize the women—and men—of the East End into an independent Workers’ Suffrage Federation. Only months later in 1914, the official WSPU leadership caved in to government pressure to support unequivocally the war effort and call off the campaign for the vote. Only the East End Federation maintained its efforts to both win the vote for women and stop the imperialist slaughter of the First World War.

Another historical claim that has followed on from these events is that the subsequent involvement of working-class women in the war effort through taking jobs in industry was the deciding factor in the winning of the vote in 1918. For example, Diane Atkinson reiterates this conclusion in her new history of the movement:

By the end of the war more than a million more women were employed in the workforce than had been the case in the summer of 1914. Most of them took jobs previously done by the men who were in the armed forces. Nine hundred thousand young, mostly working-class women were working in the munitions factories in 1918 ... Women’s war work gave politicians the excuse to abandon their anti-suffrage views and vote to give some women the vote. (Atkinson 2019: 518)

The phrase ‘some women’ is important here. In reality very few working-class women actually gained anything politically from their industrial efforts since, as Atkinson points out, the new law gave only women over 30 the vote ‘if she met the following criteria as a householder, the wife of a householder, the occupier of property with an annual rent of £5, a graduate of a British university, or similarly qualified but not a graduate’ (Atkinson 2019: 519). It was clearly a middle-class

reform, but still a historic breakthrough for women. Sylvia Pankhurst took however a broader and more critical view of the reasons behind the government's political *volte face*:

Undoubtedly the large part taken by women during the War in all branches of social service had proved a tremendous argument for their enfranchisement. Yet the memory of the old militancy, and the certainty of its recurrence if the claims of women were set aside, was a much stronger factor in overcoming the reluctance of those who would again have postponed the settlement. The shock of the foundations of existing social institutions already reverberating from Russia across Europe, made many old opponents desire to enlist the new enthusiasm of women voters to stabilize the Parliamentary machine. Above all, the changed attitude of the large public of all classes towards the position of women, which had grown up in the great militant struggle, made impossible the further postponement of our enfranchisement. (Pankhurst 1977: 607–8)

While the WSPU dissolved itself altogether in 1917, the East End Federation continued to fight on for women's rights. Thus, it was working-class women within the movement who showed the most sustained determination to pursue both their democratic and radical socio-economic demands.

This short historical background is relevant to a discussion of the novels since it is evident that the contribution of working-class women as Suffragettes remains obscure both within the movement and in the subsequent critical debate. Moreover, this obscurity is in complete contrast to the key role that female working-class characters are given in the fictional narratives. Despite the tangible lower-class focus of the novels, critics have nevertheless continued to underestimate this aspect, concentrating instead on the personal and political vacillation of middle-class characters when it comes to their involvement in the Suffragette campaign. Although it was published as early as 1907, Elizabeth Robins's novel, *The convert*, nevertheless starts to illuminate some of these underlying class tensions that lie at the heart of the Suffragette movement. Let us begin therefore by turning to Robins's pioneering work.

Based on her highly successful stage play, *Votes for women!*, Robins's novel develops the main plotline of the middle-class character, Vida Levering's conversion to the cause of women's suffrage. At the same time the novel revolves around a number of dramatically written, agitational set-pieces of public meetings in which female working-class activists are given a more prominent role as speakers. Despite its dynamic interplay of cross-class encounters, critics have nevertheless tended to dismiss this early novel as a simple political 'tract' lacking in any psychological depth.¹ In her ground-breaking history of women's writing, *A literature of their own* (1977), Elaine Showalter for instance recognizes the significance of these Suffragette novels, while dismissing their literary value: 'Relatively little of this work is distinguished as fiction, but it is of immense interest historically' (Showalter 1991: 218). Robins's novel itself, she adds, 'displayed a histrionic intensity, not wholly artistic' (Showalter 1991: 222). Writing back at Showalter from a socialist-feminist perspective, Wendy Mulford is more appreciative of Robins's achievement, not least in her attempt to balance the ideological message of the novel with the aesthetic challenge of creating convincing fictional characters:

The novel is exemplary for us precisely in posing the question as to how a writer may render passionate political commitment fictionally, and achieve a wide audience; in what way can (s)he represent the drama of that commitment centrally in the novel, and what compromises, tensions and artistic strains may be caused by the attempt? All these questions are, I would argue, crucial for our clearer understanding of the relationship of politics and art, and for confronting the challenge that political commitment makes to our evaluation of literature. (Mulford 1982: 184)

I would take this point a step further in this context and argue that it is through Robins's portrayal of the female working-class characters that this fusion of politics and art is most dramatically realized. Indeed, throughout the novel, there is a pronounced awareness of the condition of working-class women and how this adds a vital dimension to the struggle for the vote.

¹See further the extracts from contemporary reviews included in the edition of Robins's novel, *The convert*, edited by Emelyne Godfrey (2014).

Thus, the defining moments of the story are the street meetings that provide important didactic lessons both for Vida and the reader where speakers argue the Suffragette case, usually to a rowdy, male audience. These events form some of the most original sections of Robins's novel, bringing the arguments for female emancipation very much alive. It is here we get to encounter the rhetorical give-and-take of such public debates in which working-class women from the East End of London are the most effective in getting their message across:

The agreeable presence of the young chairman was withdrawn from the fighting-line, and the figure of the working-woman stood alone. With her lean brown finger pointing straight at the more outrageous of the young hooligans, and her voice raised shrill above their impertinence—

“I’ve got boys of me own,” she said, “and we laugh at all sorts o’ things, but I should be ashymed, and so would they, if ever they wus to be’yve as you’re doin’ to-d’y”.

When they had duly hooted that sentiment, they were quieter for a moment. “People ‘ave been sayin’ this is a Middle-Class Woman’s Movement. It’s a libel. I’m a workin’ woman m’self, the wife of a workin’ man” ... “You s’y woman’s plyce is ‘ome! Don’t you know there’s a third of the women in this country can’t afford the luxury of stayin’ in their ’omes? They *got* to go out and ‘elp make money to p’y the rent and keep the ‘ome from bein’ sold up. Then there’s all the women that ‘aven’t got even miserable ‘omes. They ‘aven’t got any ‘omes *at all*”.

“You said *you* got one. W’y don’t you stop in it?”

“Yes. That’s like a man. If one ‘o you is all right he thinks the rest don’t matter” ...

“I come from a plyce where many families, if they’re to go on livin’ *at all*, ‘ave to live like that. If you don’t believe me, come and let me show you!” She spread out her lean arms. ‘Come with me to Canning Town—come with me to Bromley—come to Poplar and to Bow. No, you won’t even think about the over-worked women and underfed children, and the ‘ovels they live in. And you want that *we* shouldn’t think neither”.

“We’ll do the thinkin’. You go ‘ome and nuss the byby”.

“I do nuss my byby; I’ve nursed seven. What have you done for yours?” She waited in vain for the answer. (Robins 2014: 229-231)

These open-air gatherings have also a decisive emancipatory impact on Vida’s development as a Suffragette. As the most socially prestigious ‘convert’ in the narrative, her participation, first as an observer and then as a speaker herself, signals her coming out, both physically and politically as an emancipated woman, as Joseph Maia observes: ‘[S]treet crowds play a key role in Vida’s expanding awareness of social issues as well as in her eventual development into a public speaker’ (2006: 80). At the start of the novel, she represents a typical example of the Victorian and Edwardian middle-class woman who finds no meaningful outlet for her intellectual talents at home. It is through Vida therefore that Robins traces a class journey of personal liberation from listening to the testimonies of working women speaking at meetings, to eventually visiting the slum areas of East London herself. The turning point comes when she volunteers to get up and speak, making the transformation from being a very private middle-class woman to becoming a public figure as a Suffragette campaigning in the street.

It is however significant that the female experience Vida describes in her first public intervention is not taken from her own sheltered existence, but that of a pregnant and abandoned working-class woman. This story also pre-emptly the final revelation at the end of the novel that Vida herself was forced to have an abortion after she was seduced by a man who is now a member of the Cabinet. In her speech, she tells with surprising passion the story of this unmarried working-class mother and her desperate actions. For Vida it is a key psychological moment of personal identification that also enables her to master her audience of male hecklers:

“Justice and chivalry! Justice and chivalry remind me of the story that those of you who read the police-court news—I have begun only lately to do that—but *you’ve* seen the accounts of the girl who’s been tried in Manchester lately for the murder of her child”.

People here and there in the crowd regaled one another with the choice details of the horror.

“Not pleasant reading. Even if we’d notice it, we wouldn’t speak of it in my world. A few months ago I should have turned my eyes away and forgotten even the headline as quickly as I could”.

“My opinion,” said a shrewd-looking young man, “is that she’s forgotten what she meant to say, and just clutched at this to keep her from drying up”.

“Since that morning in the police-court I read these things. This, as you know, was the story of a working girl—an orphan of seventeen—who crawled with the dead body of her new-born child to her master’s back door and left the baby there. She dragged herself a little way off and fainted. A few days later she found herself in court being tried for the murder of her child. Her master, a married man, had of course reported the ‘find’ at his back door to the police, and he had been summoned to give evidence. The girl cried out to him in the open court, ‘You are the father!’ He couldn’t deny it. The coroner, at the jury’s request, censured the man, and regretted that the law didn’t make him responsible. But”—she leaned down from the plinth with eyes blazing—“he went scot free. And that girl is at this moment serving her sentence in Strangeways Gaol ... Some of you here, I gather, call yourselves Labour men. Every woman who has borne a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of darkness”. (Robins 2014: 247-8)

At this point, the description provides a stark insight into the precarious lives of working-class women, without the reader realizing the connection to Vida’s own aborted baby. In the end, however, when her secret is revealed, there is a symbolic vindication of all women when Vida uses the fact that it is a Conservative minister who was the father of her baby in order to blackmail him into supporting a motion to give women the vote. The rather contrived melodrama of this ending does not however diminish Vida’s quest for social justice as a Suffragette.

Moreover, the overriding trajectory of the novel confirms Vida’s growing appreciation of the indispensable role of the working class, a recognition of which she makes in one of her later street speeches: ““Railways and ships are built, homes are kept going, and babies are born. The world goes on”—she bent over the crowd with lit eyes—“the world goes on *by virtue of its common people*”” (Robins 2014: 246).

Wendy Parkins notes that ‘[c]lass is an issue of explicit concern throughout *The convert* and is presented in complex if sometimes

contradictory ways' (2007: 70). Nevertheless, even at this early stage in the emergence of the Suffragette novel, the reality of working-class women's lives is already established as one of the defining points of reference in the narrative. I want to turn now to two later novels, written at the height of the campaign of civil disobedience, where the contribution of working-class activists is seen as much more of a political and moral gauge of the whole movement.

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Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally*, first published in 1911, is unique in that it has, as the prime focal point of the narrative, the life and fate of a working-class servant girl from London who becomes a dedicated Suffragette. It is also her death at the end that adds decisively to the novel's political and emotional impact. This female working-class tragedy has led some critics to interpret Sally's death due to her hunger strike and force-feeding in prison as a form of religious or class martyrdom. Kabi Hartman states for example that novels like *Suffragette Sally* are Christian conversion narratives 'marked by Christian, often specifically biblical, language and metaphor' (2003: 36). Similarly, Shirley Peterson views Sally as a lower-class handmaiden, who is willingly sacrificed to the greater good of the cause:

As the convert, Sally must be transformed into a martyr according to the clearly admirable principles of the "fine ladies and gentlemen" who are her role models. Although her martyrdom exalts her to sainthood, it paradoxically insinuates the working-class woman's expendability in the larger scheme of women's struggle for political identity. (Peterson 1993: 111)

In another context of female dependency, Carolyn Christensen Nelson states that *Suffragette Sally* 'demonstrates the impact of the call to participate in the suffrage movement on their personal lives, particularly on their relationships with men' (2004: 326).

In contrast, what I want to concentrate on is the aspect of working-class consciousness that Sally herself personifies and which defines the way she responds to her growing engagement with the Suffragette movement. For Sally, emancipation means more than just the vote, as opposed to the more whimsical commitment of middle-class Edith

Carstairs, whose political involvement parallels her own. Thus, Sally comes to the movement already with a clear understanding not only of the power that men wield over serving women like herself, but also the need of everyday strategies to cope with it:

The master's arm was round her waist and the master's hard, bristling moustache scraped her cheek. She did not want that encircling arm, and she greatly disliked that particular moustache, yet she accepted the embrace almost without resistance. It was in the day's work, so to speak; most men were like that; most masters, at any rate ... As for complaining—the mistress always took the master's side and called you a bad name, and you lost your place for nothing. It was best to keep quiet; and she took what she called "jolly good care" that the unsolicited attentions went no further than the occasional embrace. (Colmore 2007: 47)

It is once again a transformative encounter with the Suffragettes at a meeting that makes Sally begin to see in what context she could speak out and be heard, both for herself, but also for her class that is silenced in the political debate. This is what she calls her 'song of freedom', a voice from below that the Suffragette struggle helps her articulate:

A song of freedom it was, a song which told that women, however poor, however put upon, had the right to have a say in the things that mattered most to them ... a call to all women; to stand together; to be full of courage: to fight for themselves and for each other; most ardently for the poorest, the most oppressed of all. (Colmore 2007: 50–51)

This sense of female solidarity comes therefore more naturally to Sally as a worker than to Edith, who gravitates towards activism, yet who remains constricted by middle-class convention. For example Edith's first attempt to actively participate by collecting signatures for a petition is fraught with concerns about appearing in public talking to strangers.

However, as an expression of her emergent working-class sympathies, Edith realizes that she finds it easier to engage with ordinary people than those of her own class:

Poor Edith! She felt far from determined as she stood, tapping now and again a cold foot against the colder pavement, putting out a timid hand, forcing a faltering voice to say, with little gasps between the words: "Please, will you sign—a petition—to give the vote to those

women—who pay rates and taxes?” ... as the day wore on, the streets and the market-place became noisier and more crowded, the voters more boisterous and more beery. Nevertheless, in spite of the beer, it was to the working-class voters that Edith continued to turn with the greater confidence; they were more boorish, but less offensive than the better dressed men. (Colmore 2007: 56–57)

Like *The convert*, Colmore’s novel has a clear documentary intention to capture the controversy surrounding the use of violence to promote the Suffragette cause—breaking the windows of shops and public buildings, setting fire to post boxes, burning down the homes of government ministers, physically attacking politicians, vandalizing works of art and fighting with the police. Colmore also seeks to expose the more systematic state violence that was directed against Suffragette women by the police both in street clashes as well as in prison once they were arrested. The infamous street battle on 18 November 1911, which became known as ‘Black Friday’, was one such occasion where women, who went to protest against the government once again reneging on their promise to give them the vote, were brutally attacked by police and gangs of anti-suffrage thugs, as Shirley Harrison records: ‘Three hundred women marched to the House of Commons. Where they were subjected to an unprecedented onslaught ... Kicked and punched, grabbed by the hair and breasts, battered and bloody, they returned to headquarters determined to fight. On that one night ... 115 women were arrested’. (Harrison 2012: 168). Colmore portrays this attempt to terrorize the Suffragettes as an act of civil war that gave women no other choice but to adopt even more drastic methods of struggle to defend themselves: ‘Women who had been told they must not have the vote because they could not fight, showed they could fight that day; there was nothing to be done but fight, since all around was warfare; since well-dressed men and youths amused themselves by striking women; since a man appealed to for help, turned on the girl who appealed to him and hit her again and again’ (Colmore 2007: 277–78). Also, as in *The convert*, the novel contains numerous footnotes to supplement and support the storyline, adding factual weight to the more emotional arguments for women’s right to fight back. Thus, readers would hopefully find the documentary corroboration of the novel’s depiction of the persecution of activists both revelatory and shocking. The most sensitive and harrowing of these scenes are the detailed accounts of the force-feeding of Suffragettes on

hunger strike in prison. In Colmore's novel, it is significantly Sally herself who is on the receiving end of this barbaric and ultimately fatal treatment.

In the course of the novel, Sally progresses from Cockney servant girl to Suffragette sympathizer, public speaker and finally full-time activist. In contrast to Edith, her natural verbal skills come to good use when she has to deal with hostile crowds at public meetings: 'She lost too her fear of starting a speech; became at home with these street audiences; spoke, in the vernacular that was theirs and hers, of the things she felt and meant that they should feel' (Colmore 2007: 155). Inevitably, as Colmore shows, this engagement has also a profound influence on her private life. In her relationship with her fiancé, Joe, Sally begins to discern an intrinsic link between personal feelings and political commitment, which he has also to understand. No longer is she willing to accept the prospect of being confined at home as a wife and mother, the fight for women comes first. It is surprising therefore that Jane Eldridge Miller claims in her critical survey of these Suffragette novels that for Sally 'her female community does not make up for the absence of a husband and family; her political commitment is no substitute for private happiness' (1994: 151). I would argue in contrast that it is her growing radical self-awareness in what she does and says that distinguishes Sally both as an independent woman and Suffragette:

As for marriage, Joe Whittle was getting a bit restive. He had a good job now and leaned towards domesticity. But Sally was obdurate. She wasn't going to settle down yet, because she had something else to do; something that was the business of all women, and she was going to take her share. (Colmore 2007: 156)

It is through Sally's development that Colmore reveals the strength of a working-class woman who is fundamentally changed by the struggle for emancipation and who in the end gives proof of her selfless dedication to the cause.

The ultimate test comes when Sally is arrested and sentenced to Holloway prison, ironically a building she had looked out over from her tiny attic room as a servant girl. Colmore makes the hunger strike and repeated force feeding that Sally endures the most politically challenging part of the whole novel. Not only does it involve acute physical torture, it also represents a form of oral rape intended to destroy Sally's dignity and

crush her spirit. Without doubt, Colmore seeks to show what a historic crime against thousands of women these government sanctioned violations represented. The novel thus exposes the sadistic nature of the whole procedure, the details of which have lost none of their shameful horror:

They dragged her to the foot of the stairs, with her hands cuffed behind her; then, face downwards, they carried her by the arms and legs to the doctor's room. After all, they had to do as they were bid, these wardresses; their task was to bring Sally from her cell hither; they had accomplished their task. Or part of their task, for there was more to do yet. The prisoner had to be placed in a chair, the handcuffs removed and her arms held firmly, so that she could not move, while the doctor and his assistant forced down the stomach-tube into the prisoner's stomach, and then poured in the food.

The feeding over, Sally was handcuffed once more and walked to the head of the stairs ... "I ain't goin' back to that there cell," said Sally.

There were three wardresses with her: two seized her by the shoulders, the third kicked her from behind. So she went down the stairs, till she reached the bottom step, and at the bottom step the wardresses relaxed their hold. Then, with her hands secured behind her and no means of resisting the impetus of her descent, she fell forward, on her head!

(Colmore 2007: 236)

Sally never fully recovers from this punishment in prison although her radical resolve remains unbroken.

She is, therefore, far from being just another dispensable working-class victim, as has been suggested, but personifies the moral integrity of the whole campaign of struggle. While Edith retreats into a relationship with her own fiancé, Robbie, admitting in the end that 'she was conscious only that she was with Robbie, and that with him was happiness and confidence and strength', Sally dies a totally committed militant, whose life and death are the ultimate vindication of both the means and ends of the movement:

"But, Sally, isn't it dreadful to be a suffragette?—a regular one, I mean."

"Dreadful? It's stunnin', that's wot it is. It's religion an' politics; an' woman's place-is-the-'ome all in one. For religion's 'elpin' them as is

put upon; an' that's what we do. An' politics is fightin' agin the Government an' that's what we do; at least, we shall soon 'ave to take to politics again 'cos they won't pay no 'eed to you, if you leave 'em alone". (Colmore 2007: 288)

Without doubt, *Suffragette Sally* takes the portrayal of the female working-class activist to a new level of political and psychological complexity. In the final novel in this discussion, Constance Elizabeth Maud's *No surrender*, we find not only a sustained depiction of working-class life, but also the most compelling fictional recognition of the involvement of working women in the struggle for female emancipation.

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A recent reprint of Maud's novel met with a very positive critical reception even though there were the usual comments about the overtly didactic tone, as well as the dramatic focus still being on the romantic relationships between the Suffragettes and their men. Thus, Lettie Ransley wrote in *The Guardian* that while the novel 'is a passionate call to arms issued from the midst of the struggle for female suffrage', as a text it 'is perhaps primarily valuable as a social document' (Ransley 2011: n p). Lesley McDowell in *The Independent* also commented that the novel is 'political in terms of setting out its demands for votes for women, but also in its portrayal of relations between men and women, husbands and wives' (McDowell 2019: n p).

No surrender offers a comprehensive account of working-class Suffragette life—at home, at work, in street meetings and in prison. At the centre of all this is the figure of Jenny Clegg, a Lancashire mill worker who becomes a Suffragette militant and full-time activist. Since she appears at every important point in the narrative, her working-class presence is felt throughout, even when the other main character, Mary O'Neil, a middle-class philanthropist and Suffragette, figures in the context of an ongoing debate among members of the Establishment about the issue of votes for women. There is nevertheless a clear sense that it is the support of working-class women that is the driving force where the serious business of the suffrage campaign is concerned. Maud was writing at a time when a number of novels about the working-class had already appeared in print in which authors explored in naturalistic detail the lives of the poor, not least in terms of reproducing the cadences of

working-class speech—Margaret Harkness's *A city girl* (1887), George Gissing's *The nether world* (1889), Arthur Morrison's *The child of the Jago* (1896), Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) and H G Wells' *Kipps* (1905). Maud's novel continues in this social realist tradition by opening with an interior scene of factory work which documents the intolerable levels of noise, pollution, danger and exploitation of the mill. Such an informed description feels very much based on a profound knowledge of the actual conditions of female factory workers at the time:

Just above the weavers' heads spun the endless network of wheels. The looms, of which most weavers were working four, were placed so close together as to make it only just possible to pass down the narrow ways. The shuttles, like grim projectiles, darted to and fro between the warp and woof. Projectiles truly, for not infrequently they have been known to fly suddenly out of their appointed path and inflict severe injury on some unsuspecting toiler, blinding an eye or giving a deadly stab in the back. Modern invention, so active in other directions, has not yet succeeded in discovering a means of protecting the weavers from these accidents.

The pandemonium is such that no voice can be heard even when raised to a shriek. The weavers, when obliged to speak with each other, make signs and lip-read, an art in which they are adepts. The air is full of fine flakes of cotton fibre ... Ventilation, in spite of inspectors and laws, is of the meagrest and most primitive description. The air, when dry, is moistened by steam lest the thread should suffer, but the lungs of the workers are not so carefully considered. There are always plenty of girls to fill a vacant place, for the textile worker is better paid than any other class of working woman. (Maud n d: 3-4)

Immediately following on from this is a parallel scene highlighting the domestic exposure of women and children to the rule of men when a brutalized father arrives at Jenny's home brandishing a dog-whip and looking for his wife. As an example of arbitrary male power, it is revealed that he has just sent their two children off to Australia without telling her. Significantly, it is Jenny who confronts the man in an act of physical defiance that signals her first step in becoming a defender of women's rights.

Despite her obvious sympathies, Maud is nevertheless totally uncompromising in her portrayal of abuse within a working-class family,

made grimly realistic by her phonetic rendering of the northern dialect the characters themselves speak:

Jenny rounded on him sharply. "Maybe she's gone t' Australia to fetch 'er childhern. Her childhern as she bore an' suckled an' raised an' slaved for—" "You shut up yer blasted din, you damned ... or I'll set me clogs into yo'. Liz is ma wummon, I awns 'er 'cordin' to law, an' the brats too. I'll pervide for the 'ole pack as I thinks reet—and I'm goin' to learn 'er who's master so she'll not disremember." He cracked his whip so ominously that it blanched the cheek of Lizzie's mother ...

With lightening-like rapidity Jenny seized a knife from the dresser and darting at Sam jerked up his arm just as he was preparing for a second crack of the dog-whip. Before he realized her next move she had snatched the whip and flung it out of the window. "You touch 'im, you great cowardly hog, an' I'll stick this into yer ugly carcase." She brandished the carving knife before his bloodshot eyes. "You'll swing for it, yo' she-duleyo'," snarled Sam, backing however towards the door. "I doan't mind an empty bean-pod if I do." Jenny advanced slowly on him as Sam backed, "It 'ud be the best day's work o' my life riddin' the earth of sech vermin. Go, get out o' this house, an' if you dare lift a finger on our Liz or her childhern you'll 'ave me to reckon with". (Maud n d: 14–15)

It is her determination to combat the oppression of working women that makes Jenny drawn towards the militancy of the WSPU. It is a move that also points to the correspondence indicated in the novel between men trying to terrorize women in the home and the government's brutal state repression of the Suffragettes. This radical realization on Jenny's part of what women are up against makes Mary's reservations about her own commitment pale in comparison.

Thus, as in the other Suffragette novels, while activism is often seen to create complications in personal relationships, there is also a social difference in which the working-class women are more inclined to put the needs of the struggle first. In Jenny's case, the pressure she faces in this respect comes from the attentions of Joe Hopton, a working-class trade unionist, who wants to marry her. Despite supporting the Labour Party, his attitude to women is the same as the Conservative politicians he is supposed to oppose: 'Woman's sphere is the 'ome. I don't say that the working woman 'asn't her wrongs equally and maybe more acute

perhaps, than the working-man, but it's man's business to put 'em straight for 'er, and to fight the battle of life for 'er' (Maud n d: 39). Consequently, Jenny soon realizes that there are many different prisons that threaten a woman's existence and the marital cage might be even more restricting than incarceration as a Suffragette:

"Come, Jenny, be reasonable, my lass." But Jenny wrenched away her hand. "Leave go my 'and please Joe; nor you nor no man livin' is goin' to stop me doin' my dooty, even if it should mean breakin' a bad law—aye," she added vehemently, "an' goin' to prison for't." Joe let go her hand and stepped aside as he folded his arms resolutely. "I reckon you'll 'ave to choose, then, 'twixt bein' my wife, or goin' to your own ruination with these crazy women."

Jenny stood in the doorway, her eyes flashing defiance. "The choice doan't take long, Joe 'Opton. I doan't want to be wife of a man who can't see straighter than you can. Jail-bird, indeed! Well, let me tell you this, I'd be proud to be sech a jail-bird as Fanny Kelly an' Mrs. Sinclair, Mrs. Marshall an' the rest o' them. But to be your wife, bidin' at 'ome, safe and smug, while other women are givin' their lives and all the brass they can scrape together to fight for this cause, *that* I would be fair shamed on!" (Maud n d: 82)

As in the other novels, Maud's narrative culminates in the force-feeding of activists who go on hunger strike. Both Jenny and Mary are victims of this barbaric treatment. However, Maud uses this as an opportunity to make a particularly telling point about the social differences between the Suffragettes. Those activists who come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (something that could be discerned for instance by their clothes or accents) are given a medical examination beforehand to see if they could physically stand having a tube forced down their throats. If not, they are released. Working-class women however are not shown the same medical concern.

In the novel, the focus of the force-feeding is therefore on Mary, who is terrified at the prospect of this brutal attack on her person. However, when the operation is suddenly abandoned, she is clearly dismayed by the class discrimination involved:

"You will be released today. Number Thirty-three—do you understand?" Mary, opening her eyes, turned them slowly on him. "Me? Why?" "By order of the Home Secretary," said the Governor

distinctly. With a great effort Mary repeated: "Home Secretary? I don't understand," she added in deep perplexity. "Are we all released? There is one—Miss Clegg—her heart is not nearly as strong as mine." "We have no information about other prisoners," replied the Governor. "*You* are released because your condition having been reported, it is thought advisable to release you, since there might be some slight risk in forcible feeding, after your long and willful self-starving". (Maud n d: 333–34)

Maud repeats this point when Jenny is herself released from prison, much weakened by her weeks of physical torture: 'For Jenny and her seventeen companions, having no cousins among those in high places, had served out their full sentences to the bitter—very bitter end, in spite of weak hearts and fainting fits' (Maud n d: 338). The final dramatic twist in this recurring plotline of class privilege is when Mary actively gets herself arrested again, this time dressed as a working girl in order to suffer the full traumatic impact of being force fed:

She had been arrested with some working women for an open protest against the Government, but the Home Secretary ordered her release at once on the plea of a weak heart, the real reason being that she belongs to a well-known family of our aristocracy. She determined to show this up by disguising herself as a workgirl, and getting arrested again. This is what she did, and proved that the same heart in a work girl did not procure her release from this Liberal Government. There was no other way—for they had indignantly denied making any differences when they had been accused of it. (Maud n d: 365)

The references to this social bias, which is also based on a real-life case,² are certainly curious in their almost compulsive repetition. At the same

² Maud bases this episode on the case of Lady Constance Lytton who, as Melanie Philips recounts, was 'jailed in October 1909, but as she was titled she was treated well in the First Division, the most comfortable accommodation in the hierarchical prison system. This was not at all what was intended. So on a protest outside Walton Jail, Liverpool, she disguised herself as a common woman, Jane Warton, and as such got herself sentenced to fourteen days with hard labour in the Third Division. She was then force-fed eight times despite having an undiagnosed heart condition. Eventually she was released in a state of exhaustion, and her health was permanently crippled until her early death in 1923' (Philips 2004: 229).

time, such class sensibilities are something that inform the whole of Maud's novel, distinguishing it from the other two works.

The perspective that Maud adopts throughout is indicative of her radical ambition to base her narrative primarily on the authentic experience of working-class women. As has been noted, this must have been something that Maud went to great efforts to achieve, since she did not come from a lower-class background herself. Moreover, it is as though she is writing back at the leadership of the WSPU to make them appreciate the unique contribution of working-class women, as well as their tenacity and resolve to continue the struggle in the face of serious state opposition. The novel consequently concludes with a description of an iconic mass march of Suffragette activists through London in which the numerous sections of women workers under their trade banners are clearly meant to represent the social, political and moral backbone of the Suffragette 'women's army', inspiring in their workday dress and the roll-call of their essential working-class skills:

Textile workers from Lancashire and Yorkshire in their shawls and clogs. Swarthy, strong-limbed Welsh women from the pit's mouth; sweated tailoresses, doing Government work on sailors' and soldiers' uniforms at half men's pay; post office clerks, who had experienced the bitter difference between justice meted out to those with the vote and those without; chainmakers from Cradley-Heath, hat-makers, bottle-makers, match-makers, jelly-makers, each bearing on a banner the emblem of their trade; on and on they came.

Many held their babies in their arms and returned the greetings of the crowd of spectators with beaming friendly smiles to right and left. A look of steadfast purpose and hope shone on all these workers' faces, old and young alike. And still they passed—the interminable miles and miles of women. (Maud n d: 369)

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As I have indicated, the three Suffragette novels discussed here create a radical continuum of dramatizations of the thoughts and actions of female working-class activists, a category of women that have tended to be ignored or marginalized in the history of the WSPU. In these fictional narratives, their example of self-sacrifice and struggle is certainly meant to impel readers to become active themselves, to be part of what Glenda

Norquay calls ‘the female community of the suffragette cause’ (1995: 16). There is therefore an existential dimension to the novels, showing how women could live fuller and more transcendent lives by joining the movement. Jenny Clegg herself looks back on her own development in this way: ‘Never in her life had [she] known such happiness. She felt herself growing, unfolding, in this new atmosphere, mentally, physically, and spiritually—it was a wondrous sensation’ (Maud n d: 141). These remarkable Suffragette novels bear witness to this radical transformation of the lives of so many working-class women, north and south, whose experience of personal emancipation was perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the whole movement.

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