WOMEN’S RIGHTS & FAMILIES

Upton Abbey: An Improvised Comedy of English Manors

WWI munitions propaganda poster

Researched by,
Kathleen Capdesuner
OVERVIEW

“Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations.” (Queen Victoria, 1870)

Coming from the one of the most famous women in the world at the time, men in power used these words to hinder the advancement of women. Being a woman during the early twentieth century meant that you were expected to marry young, bear many children, were financially dependant on your husband, and knew divorce was socially unacceptable. The downstairs class of many British estates offered service as a line of work for many single women.

Despite the early efforts of the women’s suffrage movement, female citizens in reality had little to no rights in the early 1900’s. The prospect of a woman being independent was an appalling notion, as Queen Victoria put it, “[women] would surely perish without male protection.” (Wojtczak). It was not until 1928 that women were granted full voting rights as men. The value of women was inferior to those of men, and this conceit created obstacles for quick progress in the suffragette movement. Additionally, there was a lack of cohesion between all the women’s rights groups, and in comparison to all the other issues of wartime UK, suffrage was at the bottom of the food chain. Beginning as early as the mid-nineteenth century, women’s role in society started to shift through mediums such as the women’s suffrage movement, property rights, and their access to education.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst began The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester. The members were the first to coin the term “suffragette” and identify themselves as such. A militant group that gained public attention for their acts of arson, interrupting meetings, and hunger strikes, WSPU championed some of the most well known suffragettes of the time. Although the WSPU was well known, they were not well liked by the public. Their violent actions created a separation within the organization. To the general public, these women were seen as extremists and an object of mockery. As a result, in 1907, The Women’s Freedom League (WFL) was formed by members of the WSPU who were unhappy with Pankhurst’s violent campaigns. They preferred peaceful demonstrations such as refusing to pay taxes and completing the census. Furthermore, there was a divide amongst those who considered themselves a suffragette and a suffragist. It was said that, a “Suffragist jist wants the vote, while the Suffragette means to get it.” (Steinmetz). A suffragette believed in the more militant actions, such as the WSPU’s tactics for gaining women’s right to franchise. A suffragist aligned with the demonstrations of the WFL, and believed gender equality could be achieved non-violently.

World War I began in 1914, indefinitely changing the role of women in history. Between 1914 and 1918, an estimated two million women replaced men in employment, resulting in an increase in the proportion of women in total employment from 24% in July 1914 to 37% by November 1918 (UK Parliament). The war resulted in women’s worker unions, and more options for lines of work, but still lower wages than those of men. 1918 was a year of many firsts for women in British society. During this time, women over thirty years of age were granted the vote through the Representation of the People Act, the London Transport Women Workers’ Strike
granted female transport workers an extra 5s War bonus, and Constance Markievicz became the first woman to be elected into the House of Commons. Although this was a large step forward for suffragette movement, women were still not equal to men. Due to the amount of men who died at war, if women were given the same requirements (voting rights at 21 years old) as their counterparts, women would have been the majority of the electorate, and that was a chance male politicians could not afford to take.

**TIMELINE**

- **1918:**
  - February 6th: The Representation of the People Act was an electoral reform bill of that granted voting rights to all women property owners of thirty years or more. Before this, women could not vote in parliamentary elections.
  - The RPA was needed into order to reform the electoral system due to the amount of men returning from war who no longer met the property and residential qualifications.

  - The bill eliminated the prerequisite of men having to be property owners to have a vote and was a step forward for the suffragette movement.
  - “These changes saw the size of the electorate triple from 7.7 million to 21.4 million. Women now accounted for about 43% of the electorate.” (UK Parliament).
• Politicians in both of the main parties were worried that the women might vote for their opponents. (BBC)

■ Reality: This bill only affected a minority of women; not the young women who served in WWI.

• Women were not equal to men. Men could vote at the age of 21. Due to the amount of men who died at war, if women were given the same requirements as their counterparts women would have been the majority.

○ Munition factories were the highest employer of women during the war.

○ The London transport women workers’ strike of 1918 is one of the most well known strikes led by women for women in the labour movement.

■ August 16th: A group of women transport workers convened at the Willesden bus garage and without consulting the management or trade unions, to strike the next day. By the next evening, thousands of women stopped work. This strike was to demand a 5s war bonus pay increase. The main slogan was “same work--same pay” (Weller).

■ August 23rd: 18,000 women out of the 27,000 employed women bus and tram workers had stopped work. Women also working on the tubes - supported by some men - had stopped work on the same issue. The strikers had a series of mass meetings at the Ring, Blackfriars, where 4,000 women, many of them with children, well supplied with sandwiches and lemonade, made a day out of it.

• The strike was settled on August 25th after a tumultuous meeting at the Ring, and against very strong opposition, while the tube women remained out until the 28th. The women received the extra 5s War bonus, but the principle of equal pay was not conceded.

○ October 23rd: The House of Commons passed a motion (by 274 to 25) to make women eligible as Members of Parliament (Conservative Women's Organisation).

○ November 21st: The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act passed, allowing women to sit in parliament.

○ December 14th: During the 1918 election, there were 17 women candidates out of a total of 1,623 candidates - a mere 1% (Conservative Women's Organisation).

■ Women vote in this election, as 8.5 million are now eligible (UK Parliament).

■ Most of the female candidates had campaigned for women’s rights, including Christabel Pankhurst.

■ Constance Markievicz is the first woman to be elected into the House of Commons. There was criticism from many
suffragettes, as Constance never campaigned for the women's right movement

REFERENCES