REMEMBERING EMILY WILDING DAVISON (1872-1913)

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Abstract

This editorial reflects on the life of Emily Wilding Davison (1872-1913), a suffragette in Edwardian Britain, who died on 8th June 1913 after running on to the race course at the Derby, four days earlier, and trying to grab the reins of the King's horse, Anmer. Rather than seeing her as a suicidal fanatic, it is suggested that she was a sensible, level-headed, religious woman, a risk taker who probably did not intend to die.

It was 100 years ago this year that the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, a member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the most notorious of the groupings campaigning for the parliamentary vote for women in Edwardian Britain, died.¹ On Wednesday, 4th June 1913, she was at the Epsom Derby, standing by the white rail near Tattenham corner, a flag in the WSPU colours of purple, white and green tied around her body and hidden under her jacket. One small group of horses galloped past, running swiftly towards the winning post, but as a second group approached, she ducked under

¹ This editorial draws upon my article: June Purvis (2013) 'The Death of Emily Wilding Davison', *BBC History Magazine*, June, pp. 46-49.

the railing, raised her hands and tried to grab the reins of the King's horse, Anmer. With great force, Anmer knocked her over, rolled on his back, kicking her furiously. Emily suffered a fractured skull, severe concussion and internal injuries. Taken to Epsom Cottage Hospital, she was operated on to relieve pressure on the brain. She never recovered and died four days later.²

The Derby incident, reported by all the main newspapers, captured by Pathe news and relayed around the world, has become a defining moment in British political history. Emily Davison has been perpetuated in popular culture as an unbalanced, suicidal fanatic. But was she? Was her death accidental, as the coroner of the day concluded? And who was she?

Emily Davison was born into a comfortable middle-class home on 11 October 1872, in Blackheath, Kent, to where the Davison family had travelled from Morpeth, Northumberland, a short time before her birth. Her father, Charles Edward Davison, a widower with nine children, had married Margaret Caisley in 1868 and Emily was born four years later. While she was still a baby, Emily and her eleven siblings were moved from Blackheath to a country house near the village of Sawbridgeworth, in the border land of Hertfordshire and Essex. A high spirited, daring, affectionate and impulsive child, the leader among her siblings, she appears to have cared little for dolls but enjoyed playing soldiers and organising battles. Possessing some of the 'disciplinary instincts of the martinet', she once lined up all the children to take part in a funeral for the dead flies in the house.³ When her parents gave up their country home and moved to London she

² *The Times* 5 June 1913; *Daily Herald* 5 June 1913; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 June 1913; *London Weekly Budget*, 8 June 1913.

³ Gertrude Colmore (1913) *The Life of Emily Davison: an outline* (London, The Woman's Press), p. 7, reprinted in Ann Morley with Liz Stanley (1988) *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison, with*

attended Miss Crookshank's day school before spending a year in France with her sister. On returning home, the thirteen year old Emily became a pupil at Kensington High School where she remained, except for a year at Lausanne learning French, until 1891.

The bright Emily thrived at the High School where she excelled in English literature, French and drawing. She was also keen on physical exercise, especially cycling, dancing, skating and swimming. At the age of nineteen, she was awarded a bursary to attend Holloway College to study for the Oxford Honour School in English Language and Literature. Unfortunately, her father died half way through her course and her mother, who had returned to live at Longhorsley, near Morpeth, could not afford to continue paying the £20 per term fees. The unhappy Emily was forced to leave Holloway and take up work as a resident governess. Determined to develop her talents, she saved enough to pay for a term at St. Hugh's Hall, a women's college recently founded in Oxford, and came out with a First Class degree in English Language and Literature (Figure 1). Something of the exuberant side of her nature may be seen in her reaction to the news of this success which arrived while she was at Longhorsley. She ran into her mother's bakery and confectionery shop 'grabbed a jar of black bullets [humbugs] and went looking for the village children. She found them playing on the village green whereupon she opened the jar and flung the contents into the air, much to the children's delight.'⁴ Fired by her academic success, Emily then read for a London University degree, graduating with honours in classics and mathematics.

Gertrude Colmore's *The Life of Emily Davison* (London: The Women's Press). Most of the following details are taken from Colmore. Maureen Howes (2013 forthcoming) *Emily Wilding Davison: a suffragette's family album* (Stroud, The History Press) will offer more family information on Emily's life. For an account aimed at schoolchildren see Claudia Fitzherbert (2004) *Emily Davison: the girl who gave her life for her cause* (London: Short Books).

⁴ John Sleight (1988) *One-Way Ticket to Epsom* (Morpeth: Bridge Studios), p.28.

The range of jobs open to a university-educated woman of her day were severely restricted and so Emily, like many of her peers, became a schoolteacher, a not entirely successful experience. From 1900 to 1906, she went back to working as a governess.⁵ Undoubtedly her frustration at the secondary status of women in Edwardian society fuelled her growing interest in the women's movement. In November 1906, she joined the WSPU.⁶ Sylvia Pankhurst describes her as this time as 'tall and slender, with unusually long arms, a small narrow head and red hair. Her illusive, whimsical green eyes and thin, half-smiling mouth, bore often the mocking expression of the Mona Lisa.'⁷ Another contemporary, the journalist Rebecca West, remembered Emily as 'a wonderful talker', with 'fine wits' and a 'moral passion' to end injustice against the disadvantaged. She would sometimes stand in a London street, collecting money for the wives and children of the unemployed or poor.⁸

A feminist and a socialist who supported the Workers Educational Association and attended some of its classes, Emily became a member of the WSPU's Kilburn branch. After three years of juggling her teaching with her suffrage work she decided to devote all her time to the women's movement – and faced financial insecurity for the rest of her life, partly offset by the warmth and support of a web of close friendships that included other suffragettes, such as Mary Leigh, Rose Larmartine Yates and Eleanor Penn

⁵ Elizabeth Crawford (1999) in her entry on Emily Wilding Davison, in her book *The Women's Suffrage Movement: a reference guide 1866-1928* (London: UCL Press), p. 159 states that the family was in Berkshire, while Fran Abrams (2003) in her chapter titled Emily Wilding Davison, in *Freedom's Cause: lives of the suffragettes* (London: Profile Books), p. 163 notes that the family lived in Northamptonshire.

⁶ Entry on Emily Wilding Davison in A. J. R. (ed.) (1913) *The Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* (London: Stanley Paul), p. 221.

⁷ E. Sylvia Pankhurst (1931) *The Suffragette Movement* (London: Longman), p. 328.

⁸ Rebecca West (1913), The life of Emily Davison, *The Clarion*, 20 June 1913.

Gaskell.⁹ Determined, bookish, level-headed, kind and likeable, Emily was also a risk taker who over the next four years embarked on some of the most daring of exploits. She was imprisoned eight times, hunger struck seven times and was forcibly fed forty-nine times.¹⁰

In June 1909, after her first imprisonment (she was arrested five times that year, once for stone throwing), she wrote, ‘Through my humble work in this noblest of all causes I have come into a fullness of job and an interest in living which I never before experienced.’¹¹ Forcibly fed for the first time later that autumn, Emily claimed it was an experience that would ‘haunt’ her ‘with its horror’ all her life.¹² After this brutal procedure, she barricaded the door to her cell with her two bed planks, a stool, two slippers and hairbrush, in order to prevent further feeding. Unable to prise open the door, the prison authorities put a hose pipe through the cell window, pouring in icy water with great force. ‘The thought in my mind was that the moment for the sacrifice, which we have all agreed will probably be demanded, was at hand, and, strange to say, I had no fear’, she later wrote.¹³ When the door was finally broken down, Emily was fed again. Released eight days after her sentence, she won her case against the authorities for breaching prison regulations in turning the hose pipe on her. This imprisonment was a formative moment in her life.¹⁴ She now believed that the giving of a life might be the

⁹ The friendship aspect of Emily’s life is stressed in Morley with Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*.

¹⁰ Rebecca West, *The Life of Emily Davison*, *The Clarion* 20 June 1913, reprinted in Jane Marcus Ed. (1982) *The Young Rebecca: writings of Rebecca West 1911-17* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), p. 179.

¹¹ Letter from E. W. D to the Editor, *Votes for Women*, 11 June 1909, p. 781.

¹² *Votes for Women*, 5 November 1909, p. 85.

¹³ *Votes for Women*, 5 November 1909, p. 85.

¹⁴ Gay L. Gullickson, Emily Wilding Davison: secular martyr *Social Research*, 75, no 2, Summer 2008, p. 469.

only way to force an obdurate government to stop torturing women who were campaigning in a just, democratic cause.

Determined on political protest, Emily managed during 1910 and 1911 to evade the security staff at the House of Commons and hide there on three separate occasions, once in the hot-air shaft and twice in the crypt.¹⁵ Such imaginative and novel escapades made her well known. By March 1910 she had become a paid worker for the WSPU, in the Information Department, also writing regular articles for its first newspaper, *Votes for Women*.¹⁶ In December 1911, Emily initiated a different form of protest when, without the knowledge of the leadership, she was arrested for setting fire to the letter box just outside Parliament Street post office, something which she claimed she had already done to two other post-boxes earlier that day, acting entirely on her 'own responsibility'.¹⁷ In the dock, she explained that she had engaged in such action partly as a protest against the vindictive sentence and treatment of 'my comrade, Mary Leigh' (who had been sentenced to two months imprisonment in contrast to Lady Constance Lytton who, despite the greater damage she had inflicted, had been sentenced to only two weeks). Calling upon the Liberal Government to include a women's suffrage measure in the King's speech on 14 February 1912, she argued that when men had agitated for reform in the past, 'the next step after window-breaking was incendiarism' and that she had engaged in such an act 'in order to draw the attention of the private citizen to the fact that this question of reform is

¹⁵ *London Weekly Budget*, Suffragette at the Derby courted a martyr's death, 8 June 1913.

¹⁶ Cicely B. Hale (1975) *A Good Long Time* (Chichester and London: Barry Rose), p. 52; Abrams, Emily Wilding Davison, p. 167.

¹⁷ *The Standard*, 15 December 1911; *Votes for Women*, 22 December 1911, p. 196.

their concern as well as that of women.’¹⁸ The judge showed no mercy, and she was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment.

In June 1912, Emily joined other hunger-striking suffragettes in Holloway prison who earlier that year had engaged in mass window smashing. Yet again, she attempted to stop the forcible feeding of her friends by, on three separate occasions, throwing herself over the landing railings. ‘At ten o’clock on the Saturday a regular siege took place ... On all sides one heard crowbars, blocks, and wedges being used; men battering on doors with all their might. The barricading was always followed by the sounds of human struggle, suppressed cries of the victims’ groans, and other horrible sounds.’ Emily listened to the sounds coming nearer and nearer in her direction, and when her turn came, she fought ‘like a demon’ at her door which was forced open with crowbars. Overcome by five sturdy wardresses, she was forcibly fed. As she lay recovering in her bed, the thought came to her ‘that some desperate protest must be made to put a stop to the hideous torture which was now being our lot.’ When the women were allowed out of their cells, she threw herself twice over the railings, but the wire netting stopped her fall. Summoning all her courage, she then threw herself from the netting onto an iron staircase, a drop of about 10 feet. She heard a ‘fearful thud’ and lost consciousness; she had injured her head and cracked two vertebrae in her spine. Visited by the Governor the following day, she told him that she thought ‘one big tragedy would save the others.’ Despite his promise to look into the matter, and despite Emily’s serious injuries, she was fed again.¹⁹ Although Emily was not alone in her willingness to risk injury for the

¹⁸ *Votes for Women* 29 December 1911, p. 212.

¹⁹ A year ago, A statement by Miss Emily Wilding Davison on her release from Holloway, June, 1912, *The Suffragette*, 13 June 1913, p. 577.

women's cause, she was gaining a reputation for unpredictability.²⁰ Her self destructive action was not favoured by the WSPU leadership, nor by her friends. 'You have done enough – done your full share and more', Eleanor Penn Gaskell replied to Emily when she spoke of her idea that a life would have to be given before the vote was won.²¹

After her release, Emily told the *Pall Mall Gazette* that she had deliberately tried 'to commit suicide' because she felt that 'by nothing but the sacrifice of human life would the nation be brought to realise the horrible torture our women face. If I had succeeded I am sure that forcible feeding could not in all conscience have been resorted to again.'²² A few days later she compared, the suffering of the suffragettes to that of the early Christians, pointing out that the women were only able to endure their torture because they knew that 'right' and 'moral force' were on their side.²³ This argument was not unusual in WSPU rhetoric. As early as 1909, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, one of the WSPU leaders, had spoken of the forcibly fed 'saints and warriors of today' who had been 'called to be partakers of the cross and passion of the martyrs who, by their agony endured for their faith ... [and] brought hope, redemption, and release into the world of sin and sorrow'.²⁴ Although men might control women's bodies, the spirit could rise, in a Christ-like way, above the physical suffering, despite the personal cost. Such a spiritual victory would eventually convince men of the justice of their cause.

At the end of November 1912, Emily was arrested in Aberdeen for attacking with a dog whip a Baptist minister, whom she had mistaken for Lloyd George, a government

²⁰ Krista Cowman (2007) *Women of the Right Spirit: paid organisers of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) 1904-18* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), p.158.

²¹ Colmore, *The Life of Emily Davison*, p. 49

²² Letter to the editor, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 19 September 1912, p. 4.

²³ Letter to the editor, *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 21 September 1912.

²⁴ Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, A calendar of saints, *Votes for Women*, 5 November 1909, p. 89.

minister. Recuperating at Longhorsley, in January 1913, the hard-up Emily was looking for work. 'At present I have no settled work here or in town', she wrote to an old school friend. 'While here I busy myself writing my experiences and doing what I can to help my mother ... I wish I could hear of some (work) though.'²⁵ Although she was considered too erratic to be given a paid WSPU position, suggestions that Emily was completely out of favour with the WSPU leadership have been exaggerated.²⁶ The WSPU secretary tried to help her find literary employment and Emmeline Pankhurst sent an invitation to a reception at the London headquarters on 1st March.²⁷ By now the WSPU had still not won votes for women. Further, it largely operated as an underground movement since it was increasingly adopting illegal, violent tactics, including secret arson – although non-violent forms of protest were still evident, such as protests in churches. Worse, it was widely feared that Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the WSPU, who took full responsibility for all acts of militancy and was continually in and out of prison under the 'Cat-and-Mouse Act', was being slowly killed by a heartless, obstinate, undemocratic government.²⁸ But it was not Emmeline Pankhurst who was to die that summer of 1913 (she died in 1928) but Emily Davison.

On hearing of Emily Davison's death, the shocked and saddened WSPU leadership identified her as a martyr for the women's cause. She was 'one of our bravest soldiers ... [who] gladly laid down her life for women's freedom', wrote Emmeline Pankhurst. 'We who remain can best honour her memory by continuing our work unceasingly.'²⁹ The

²⁵ Colmore, *The Life of Emily Davison*, p. 53.

²⁶ Abrams, *Emily Wilding Davison*, p. 171.

²⁷ Emily Wilding Davison Papers, The Women's Library at LSE, letter from Harriet R. Kerr, and undated invitation, quoted in Abrams, *Emily Wilding Davison*, p. 171.

²⁸ See June Purvis (2002) *Emmeline Pankhurst: a biography* (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 217-23; Jill Liddington (2006) *Rebel Girls: their fight for the vote* (London: Virago), p. 275.

²⁹ *Daily Herald*, 10 June 1913.

front cover of 13th June 1913 issue of *The Suffragette*, edited by Christabel Pankhurst, key strategist and co-leader of the WSPU, contained a drawing of a female angel, wings unfurled and arms raised, standing in front of white railings at a race track. ‘In Honour And In Loving, Reverent Memory Of Emily Wilding Davison. She Died for Women’, ran the caption. ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends’. Inside the cover, Christabel eulogised, ‘So greatly did she care for freedom that she died for it. So dearly did she love women that she offered her life as their ransom ... She has said: “I want the Vote, I care for it, more than my life, and I give my life as pledge of my desire that women shall be free.”’³⁰

Five thousand women from all over Britain, most in white dresses with black armbands, marched in the funeral procession in London on 14th June, the last of the great suffragette spectacles (Figures 2 and 3). The ill Emmeline Pankhurst, determined to attend, was rearrested as she stepped into the street from the flat where she was being nursed. An empty carriage, drawn by two horses, with groups of hunger strikers marching behind and before it, was a poignant reminder that while the disciple might be ‘honoured in death’, the leader was subjected to an infamous act of parliament.³¹ Vast, largely silent crowds lined the streets. After the coffin was carried into St. George’s Church, Bloomsbury, for a short memorial service, it was conveyed to King’s Cross Station where it was taken by train to Morpeth for burial in St. Mary’s churchyard (Figure 4).³²

³⁰ Christabel Pankhurst, Emily Wilding Davison, *The Suffragette*, 13 June 1913, p. 576.

³¹ Purvis, *Emmeline Pankhurst*, pp. 222-3.

³² *Daily Telegraph, The Times, Daily Herald, Daily Sketch, Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 16 June 1913; *The Suffragette* 20 June 1913, pp.594-5.

So was Emily Wilding Davison an unbalanced suicidal fanatic? Certainly, some male historians have thought so. George Dangerfield in his influential *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, first published in 1935, called her ‘a very unbalanced girl’, a description that has echoed down to the present. Andrew Rosen, in 1974, even suggested that Emily may have found ‘a quasi-sexual fulfilment in the contemplation of self-destruction.’ David Mitchell, in 1997, sneered that the funeral was like ‘a mobster’s farewell’.³³ Yet the evidence presented here presents a very different picture. As her modern biographers Anne Morley and Liz Stanley argue, Emily Wilding Davison was a sensible woman with a coherent philosophy who deliberately undertook her final militant act, knowing it might have fatal consequences.³⁴ A risk taker, Emily probably did not intend to die. After all, she had bought a return ticket to Epsom, indicating she intended to travel back home. But is that the whole story?

Most present day feminist assessments, with their secular bias, give little attention to Emily’s religious convictions.³⁵ Yet Gertrude Coleman, her first biographer, notes that she was ‘[i]nnately religious’, and ‘fully convinced that she was called by God, not only to work but also to fight for the cause she had espoused.’³⁶ Emily, a devout Anglican and regular churchgoer, always kept a Bible by her bed and said very long prayers. Her own particular motto was ‘Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God.’³⁷ Further, in ‘The Price of Liberty’, published posthumously, she wrote that the ‘true militant’ would

³³ George Dangerfield (1966) *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, first published 1935), p. 142; Andrew Rosen (1974) *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union 1903-1914* (London and Boston: Routledge), p. 200; David Mitchell (1977) *Queen Christabel: a biography of Christabel Pankhurst* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s), p. 217.

³⁴ Morley with Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, p. 65.

³⁵ Gullickson, Emily Wilding Davison, p. 476-80 does give coverage to this. Abrams, Emily Wilding Davison, p. 163 notes that Emily’s religious views were ‘one slight oddity in her character’.

³⁶ Colmore, *The Life of Emily Davison*, p. 19

³⁷ Colmore, *The Life of Emily Davison*, p. 20 and 23.

willingly sacrifice friendship, good report, love and even life itself to ‘win the Pearl of Freedom for her sex.’ Referring to Christ’s suffering on the cross, she continued, ‘To lay down life for friends, that is glorious, selfless, inspiring! But to re-enact the tragedy of Calvary for generations yet unborn, that is the last consummate sacrifice of the Militant!’³⁸ Although Morley and Stanley believe that Emily was here referring to Emmeline Pankhurst, I think it was much more likely that she was speaking about herself and her own willingness to die for others, a point that Gay Gullickson also emphasises.³⁹

It is important to remember that the suffragette movement had not only a political secular motive but also a much broader spiritual agenda. Emily Wilding Davison’s death was not a ‘suicide’ in the ordinary meaning of the term since she risked her life to save her comrades from any further suffering. Suicide would have meant that she, a deeply committed Anglican, could not be buried in consecrated ground. Although we will never know what went through her mind that fateful day, the suffragettes understood her action, a desperate measure undertaken by a clever, level-headed woman for the cause of democracy. It is fitting that we, and many others throughout the world, remember Emily Wilding Davison, a courageous woman who 100 years ago left her imprint on British history.

³⁸ Emily Wilding Davison, The price of liberty, *The Suffragette*, 5 June 1914, p. 129.

³⁹ Morley with Stanley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, p.163; Gullickson, Emily Wilding Davison, p. 473..