SEX & SUFFRAGE — IN — BRITAIN

1860 ~ 1914

Susan Kingsley Kent

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SEX AND SUFFRAGE IN BRITAIN, 1860–1914

Susan Kingsley Kent

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For
Anne Kent and Michael Mendelsohn
in memory of their daughter
Elisa

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SUSAN KINGSLEY KENT
Natick, Massachusetts
June 1986

SEX AND SUFFRAGE IN BRITAIN, 1860–1914

INTRODUCTION

> For—let there be no mistake about it—this movement was not primarily political; it was social, moral, psychological and profoundly religious.
>
> HELENA SWANWICK, 1935

Until very recently, historians have tended to characterize the women's suffrage campaign in England as an exclusively political movement, as merely an attempt on the part of women to share in the general enfranchisement that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. Feminists did, indeed, demand recognition from and participation in the political process, but to stop here is to describe, not to understand, the feminist movement. In fighting for enfranchisement, suffragists sought no less than the total transformation of the lives of women. They set out to redefine and recreate, by political means, the sexual culture of Britain. Though suffragists repeatedly made this clear to the British public—and their opponents did not fail to take them at their word—the image of the suffrage campaign as a conservative, limited, purely political movement has remained intact. In one of the most recent claims, Patricia Stubbs, echoing the conventional wisdom, asserted in 1981 that the feminist movement "was entirely civic in its aims and organization."[1]

Within the last few years, historians such as Olive Banks, Les Garner, and Brian Harrison have acknowledged that the suffrage campaign went beyond the strictly political, but they have not adequately analyzed the primary connections between sexual issues and the demand for the vote.[2] Richard Evans, for instance, defining feminism as the doctrine of equal rights for women, has stated that moral reform movements such as that seeking to end the state regulation of prostitution "further contributed to the extension of the feminist movement in a radical direction."[3] He has not pursued the ramifications of this insight by defining the nature of that radicalism and has thus missed an opportunity to see how the suffrage campaign furthered other feminist aims.

Evans has conceded that "people do not…commit themselves to political action and suffer the scorn, contempt, ridicule and hatred which the feminists were forced to endure, merely out of intellectual conviction."[4] He discerned the motives for feminism in the social and economic developments of the nineteenth century that gave rise to the middle class. The professionalization of medicine, education, and business, he has stated, forced women to adjust by seeking higher educational standards in order to qualify for admission to the new professions. The increasing importance of property and wealth as the foundation of status in society led women to seek the legal right to an independent share of that wealth. Finally, as it became increasingly offensive for the aristocracy to maintain and pursue a life of leisure, it became impossible for self-respecting middle-class women to share that idle existence.[5]

Evans's analysis, though accurate, is limited. It fails to account for the agency of women and ascribes motivation to amorphous economic and social development. Moreover, it does not explain satisfactorily why feminists provoked and, by Evans's admission, endured "scorn, contempt, ridicule, hatred," and violence. Above all, Evans has not listened to the arguments the women

themselves advanced as they explained their justification and goals. An important key to understanding the persistence of feminist agitation lies in analyzing not only the social and economic developments of the nineteenth century but the ideological developments as well. The domestic ideology proclaimed in this period associated women not only with the household but also with biological characteristics that objectified them as "the Sex." The feminist movement, especially the campaign for the suffrage, aimed to alter that perception so that women would no longer be objectified or defined essentially in terms of their bi ology and would no longer be victims of what they deemed to be male sexual tyranny.

The difficulty for historians in hearing the explanations advanced by feminists lies in their conception of the relation of sexuality to politics. In keeping with the notions elaborated so effectively in the nineteenth century, sexuality and politics are each assigned a separate sphere, one private, one public. According to this ideology, if women are seeking change in the political, public sphere, they cannot be motivated by private issues such as sexual identity. Nineteenth-century feminists argued, however, that the public and the private were not distinct spheres but were inseparable from one another; the public was private, the personal was political. Suffragists perceived their campaign as the best way to end a "sex war" brought about by separate sphere ideology—an ideology that finally reduced women's identity to a sexual one, encouraged the view of women as sexual objects, and perpetuated women's powerlessness in both spheres. Historians have not been able to see beyond their categorizations, which firmly separate politics and sexuality into different realms of thought and activity. They have dismissed the "sex war" as an aberration or a titillating sidelight. But for contemporaries—men as well as women, parliamentary leaders as well as suffragists—the "sex war" formed the crux of the suffrage campaign and

provides one of the keys to comprehending the true nature of the women's movement.

Most historians have described as anomalous or bewildering certain features of the suffrage campaign that were, in fact, integral to its aims and meaning. The most conspicuous example is the treatment of Christabel Pankhurst's "Great Scourge" articles in the *Suffragette* in 1913, in which she asserted that from 75 percent to 80 percent of all men in England suffered from some form of venereal disease, and she pointed out the consequent dangers of marriage for women. The solution, she insisted, was "Votes for Women, Chastity for Men." Roger Fulford baldly stated that Pankhurst's "arguments and facts fortunately need not detain the reader."[6] Andrew Rosen, while devoting a chapter to "The Great Scourge," expressed incredulity at the failure of members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to repudiate Pankhurst's leadership after publication of the articles. "It is not easy to explain," he announced, "why the officials and the ordinary members of the WSPU neither took exception to Christabel's allegations nor questioned seriously her fitness to continue to set WSPU policy."[7] Completely disregarding the possibility that her followers might have agreed with her, he hinted that some insidious lesbianism attached to the militant movement might explain the "idiosyncratic" aspects of "The Great Scourge."[8] Finally, he concluded that

> it is possible that ready acceptance of Christabel's ideas stemmed in part from many unmarried WSPU members' desires to legitimize the socially and economically precarious role of the unmarried woman. WSPU members had often alluded to heterosexual activity as a vehicle for the satisfaction of selfish male pleasure, and frequently associated active heterosexuality with either immorality or the male domination involved in marriage. If marriage

> was as intensely dangerous as Christabel claimed, then fortunate the woman who had not married![9]

Rosen intimated that feminist charges of immorality and sexual oppression within the marriage bond were disingenuously marshaled in order to justify what appeared to him to be the rather bizarre desire of women to remain single. His exclamation point belies the seriousness with which he treated a matter that held profound importance for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists and, indeed, for society in general.

Rosen stated—correctly—that Pankhurst's "factual assertions regarding the prevalence and consequences of venereal disease were grossly exaggerated."[10] O.R.McGregor spoke of the "fantastic idiocy of Miss Pankhurst's belief that three-quarters of the male population suffered from venereal disease."[11] Neither writer informed the reader that Pankhurst's misleading figures and descriptions of the consequences of such disease for women were those widely propagated by the medical profession.[12] The establishment of a Royal Commission on Venereal Disease in 1913 demonstrates the degree to which medical and governmental authorities were alarmed by the incidence of venereal disease. Worse, in reading Pankhurst's words literally and dismissing her argument because it lacks statistical veracity, Rosen and McGregor have subjected a historical problem to a test of statistical truth instead of analyzing Pankhurst's language to get at the meaning of her statements.[13] Pankhurst is made to appear ridiculous—a fanatic—and is therefore to be dismissed, along with issues that, in actuality, pervaded and informed the entire suffrage movement. Although one must acknowledge the air of the dramatic, even of the absurd, about Pankhurst, it is a mistake to deprecate the views she communicated to the public in "The Great Scourge." For she only presented in a highly visible and provocative manner concerns that many suffragists had explicitly stated were at the heart of their agitation: the

double standard of morality, prostitution, and the sexual objectification and abuse of women. But when traditional historians approach the issues of sex and sexuality raised by suffragists, they treat the women either as deranged, à la Rosen and McGregor, or as perverse. David Mitchell's biography of Pankhurst, for instance, has presented suffragists as sex-starved and masochistic.[14] George Dangerfield labeled the militant suffrage campaign a movement of "pre-war lesbianism."[15]

While Evans and others such as William O'Neill have pointed to the moral ties between sexual issues and feminism,[16] Judith Walkowitz, in her ground-breaking study of Victorian prostitution, has forged direct links between the Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts repeal campaign of the 1870s and 1880s and the suffrage movement.[17] Passed by Parliament to regulate prostitution and reduce the incidence of venereal disease in garrison towns, the CD Acts gave police the authority to arrest any woman sus pected of being a prostitute and compelled the women to submit to an examination by speculum. Feminist advocates of repeal, inspired and led by the eminently respectable Josephine Butler, labored tirelessly for sixteen years to eradicate the laws and attitudes that conspired to make women "safe" for male vice and to subject women to the "instrumental rape" of the compulsory examination. Walkowitz has noted that Edwardian suffragists used many of the tactics first practiced by the repealers—militant acts, by-election campaigning, and extraparliamentary activity—and referred to Butler as the "great founding mother of modern feminism."[18] More important, Walkowitz has pointed out, "the repeal campaign firmly committed later feminists to an attack on the double standard and 'male vice.' The sixteen-year campaign against state regulation ingrained the theme of the sexual wrongs perpetrated against women by men on later feminist consciousness." She has argued that many of the actions of the militants—arson and window-breaking, for example— were "part of

a real sex war, whose explicit political precedent may be traced to the campaign against the C.D. Acts."[19]

Walkowitz's study constitutes the first comprehensive treatment of English feminists as active agents in a political campaign to transform sexual mores rather than as passive victims of ideological prescriptions. 'The repeal campaign," she has argued,

> has occupied an important niche in the history of nineteenth-century feminism, although its contributions to the emerging feminist movement have never been satisfactorily explored. As conventionally depicted in the historiography of feminism, the Ladies' National Association's attack on male vice and the double standard is made to seem out of place next to the more decorous struggles for the franchise, property rights, and access to higher education.[20]

In fact, the women's battle against state-regulated prostitution and the double standard was an integral aspect of a movement that included the other "decorous struggles," specifically the suf frage campaign. It struck at the heart of women's difficulties: their sense of sexual objectification and victimization. The franchise movement —as well as the campaigns for property rights and access to medicine and higher education—were all of a piece; they aimed at a redefinition of the roles of and relationships between women and men in English society.

The campaign for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts explicitly identified for thousands of women the socio-sexual structure set up by patriarchal society. It crystallized for women their status as sexual objects and catapulted many complacent, mild-mannered women into the public sphere to discuss a heretofore unmentionable issue. The leadership of the Ladies' National Association (LNA) was committed to feminism before its involvement with the repeal campaign, but that was not the case for

thousands of women who were propelled into the movement as a result of Butler's activities on behalf of prostitutes and other victims of the double standard. Madame Emilie Venturi, an LNA member, confided in 1872 to Henry Wilson, a steadfast proponent of repeal, that "until roused up by the CDA infamy, I confess that I never took any part in political life in England."[21] Her epiphany was typical. Walkowitz has asserted that the "LNA attracted hundreds of middle-class women to the political arena for the first time."[22] Many women told Millicent Garrett Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), that they came to the suffrage movement after working with, knowing, or hearing of Josephine Butler.[23]

The momentum created by the CD Acts repeal campaign and the issues it raised for women spread to and influenced many other reform movements. "The vitality of our Crusade," wrote Butler, "appeared…to cause it to break through the boundaries of its own particular channel and to create and fructify many movements and reforms of a collateral character. We felt it necessary, while combatting the State Regulation of vice… also to work against all those disabilities and injustices which affect the interests of women."[24] In many instances, however, feminists were compelled by the ferocity of the opposition to the repeal effort to understate their auxiliary demands. For the attacks on the repealers were vituperative in the extreme. One Member of Parliament declared that Butler—a member of the Grey family that produced a Prime Minister—was "worse than the prostitutes."[25] A journalist described her as "an indecent maenad, a shrieking sister, frenzied, unsexed, and utterly without shame."[26] Butler lamented that "motives of the worst kind were sometimes imputed, among the most frequent being that of a lurking sympathy, not with the sinners alone, but with their most hateful sin."[27] This kind of abuse and language constituted more than simple insult or defamation. The language of sexuality employed by

extentionists joined that of the feminists—suggesting that the opposition recognized feminist intentions and purposes. Many historians, however, have dismissed this language as insult; they have not regarded it as serious political discourse and so have missed the connection between sex and politics.

The furor raised by the repeal campaign was so great that until 1877 feminists felt it necessary—for strategic reasons—to divorce Butler's crusade from other feminist reform movements. Neither Fawcett nor Emily Davies, leader of the struggle for higher education, wanted a breath of scandal attached to her cause.[28] They did not, however, repudiate the work of Butler and the LNA. On the contrary, they regarded it as of the utmost importance. Butler confided to Maria Grey in 1871, "Some of my best friends have frankly told me that they must get rid of my name in their schemes or committees for good objects, although *they* heartily follow me in my special work."[29] Ray Strachey, a suffragist and intimate of Fawcett, stated that the repeal campaign was a movement that Fawcett supported with "her whole heart," despite the fact that her sister, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, one of the first female physicians in England, supported the acts on the grounds that they would protect innocent women and children from venereal disease.[30] Fawcett herself, in tribute to Butler, asserted that "the long years of [CD Acts] propaganda had been invaluable…in shedding light on the wider aspect of women's place as responsible citizens in the body politic."[31]

For, despite strategic differences, the suffrage campaign itself espoused the same ideas and sought the same ends as the campaign for repeal of the CD Acts. "It cannot be," wrote Frances Swiney, President of the Cheltenham branch of the NUWSS, in 1908,

> that, in England, for the simple possession of the political vote, the woman question should absorb the thoughts and attentions of so many able minds; there

> must be in the logical nature of things an ulterior motive, an underlying force, that is the foundation for one of the most noticeable features of the end of the nineteenth century. This unrest, this straining forward, this earnestness and unity of purpose in woman, must be for a certain goal towards which the franchise is but a means to an end.[32]

Ethel Colquhoun, an avowed anti-suffragist, recognized in 1913 that "such surface manifestations as the franchise agitation" were "only superficial expressions of something deeper." She found that underlying motive in what Olive Schreiner had spoken of in 1911 as "dis-co-ordination, struggle and consequent suffering which undoubtedly exist when we regard the world of sexual relations and ideals."[33]

Many feminists testified that their movement was at bottom a struggle for sexual autonomy. Helena Swanwick, a member of the NUWSS and editor of *Common Cause,* the NUWSS'S official newspaper, remembered that during her childhood she spent many hours reading novels depicting the plight of women. "I must have been still a child," she wrote, "when I rebelled against the common morality of the day in regard to respectability in sex relations."[34] Her resentment continued in her teens, when she discovered that "I could not be allowed out after dark, even in frequented thoroughfares. When it was explained to me that a young girl by herself was liable to be insulted by men, I become incoherent with rage at a society which, as a consequence, shut up the girls instead of the men."[35] Cicely Hamilton, a militant suffragist, attributed her feminist beliefs to the fate of women in a society that operated under a double standard of morality. "I believe my youthful thoughts and views on the relations of the sexes were a good deal influenced by the story of Lucrece [a Roman woman who committed suicide after being raped]," she stated,

> and that, all unconsciously, I became a feminist on the day I perceived that—according to the story—her "honour" was not a moral but a physical quality. Once that was clear to me my youthful soul rebelled; it was insulting to talk of "honour" and "virtue" in a woman as if they were matters of chance—things which she only possessed because no unkind fate had thrown her in the way of a man sufficiently brutal to deprive her of them by force.[36]

Teresa Billington-Greig, an early member of the WSPU and later of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), listed "my mother's position and resentment" as the foremost factor in "the genesis of my personal rebellion."[37] Billington-Greig's mother, Helen Wilson, had been educated in a Catholic convent school and hoped to become a nun. When the sisters refused her, she was expected to marry William Billington. Helen shrank from the intimacies of married life. "[A]ll [her] life she remained a rebel in sex matters[,] submitting only so far as her own interpretation of her Church's teaching committed her, and no farther," her daughter recalled.

> With the church and the law and the convention behind him [William] was yet never able to win more than indignant acquiescence from his wife; and their years together therefore were a succession of battles…. The experience of [the marriage's] day by day working was a crucial part of my home environment[,] one of the strange and distressing elements that subdued and invaded the centre of my world, a mystery, a menace which always hung like a potential disruption of family peace. Naturally as a child I did not know the cause or meaning of this enduring conflict. There was no clear knowledge of some mysterious wrong— a sort of imprisonment or servitude which was somehow imposed by William

> upon Helen but there was the indelible impression that such wrong existed.[38]

These feminists intended to create a society that would eliminate sexual wrongs through the elevation of women to human status. Beatrice Forbes-Robinson Hale, involved in both the English and the American suffrage movements, insisted that "the first axiom of Feminism" is "that the majority of human attributes are not sexual."[39] Ethel Snowden explained that the feminist "asks for freedom for women in the exercise of those gifts and in the use of those qualities of soul and mind which are apart from the consequences of the sex-act. She objects to the forcing of woman's interests into one groove."[40] Snowden saw that the definition of woman as only a reproductive/sexual being held all sorts of opportunities for the degradation, even the brutalization, of women. "For the woman as a human being, and not as an animal, the feminist demands opportunity and freedom," she asserted.[41]

The vote became both the symbol of the free, sexually autonomous woman and the means by which the goals of a feminist sexual culture were to be attained. The ultimate source and embodiment of patriarchal power was seen to lie in political expression, or law, and the vote was perceived as a strategic tool for changing law. Thus, the demand for women's enfranchisement was a direct strike at the very seat and symbolic locus of patriarchal power. Josephine Butler had originally believed that all the reforms feminists were fighting for in the legal and po litical realm could have no real impact on the lives of women if the more fundamental issue of the relations between men and women was not first addressed and resolved.[42] She soon realized that sexual autonomy and political rights could not remain separated from one another.[43] "We shall never have faith and courage enough in Parliament," she maintained, "to attack this monster evil [of prostitution] in its sources until the convictions of women as well as of men are represented there."[44]

For Fawcett the suffrage campaign and the franchise were "a still further strengthening of the foundations on which [Butler] had been building."[45] She described suffragists as those who were "trying to preach and live the gospel of a nobler and truer relationship between the sexes."[46] Strachey noted that Fawcett saw the suffrage as a means to eliminate prostitution, ease divorce constraints upon women, and raise public morals generally. She insisted that women's disenfranchisement was directly connected to the existence of prostitution, a double standard of divorce, and low public morals that victimized women, so she concentrated her energies in the battle for the vote.[47]

Partisans of women's suffrage who were less reticent than Fawcett described more explicitly the motives and aims of the suffrage movement.[48] Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, active in all aspects of the feminist movement—suffrage, higher education and medicine for women, property rights, and divorce reform— from its inception in the 1860s to the granting of limited suffrage to women in 1918, summed up the entire issue of women's suffrage in a letter to Harriet McIlquham in 1897. "It is the fear of men that women will cease to be any longer their sexual slaves either in or out of marriage that is at the root of the whole opposition to our just claim," she asserted. "No doubt their fear is justified, for that is precisely what we do mean."[49]

How do we explain all this talk of sex and sexuality by women involved in a political struggle? The hypotheses advanced by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* suggest an approach to understanding the sexual issues that so permeated the suffrage campaign. Foucault noted that during the nineteenth century the discussion of sex and sexuality flourished, that the era witnessed "the great process of transforming sex into discourse." The discourses on sexuality, the primary articulators of which were scientists and doctors, expressed "a cluster of power relations." The "explosion of distinct discursivities," "*the*

multiplication of discourses concerning sex," served as a means of "exercising power itself," Foucault maintained. Power, he suggested, was not a thing located in any particular place but was the possession of knowledge.[50]

Physicians played a major role in the creation and multiplication of the sexual discourse. In the course of the nineteenth century, Foucault argued, doctors took it upon themselves, employing "science," to discover and guard "the truth of sex," to act as arbiters in formulating sexual norms and the sexual identity of individuals. In the hands of physicians, sexuality became transformed from one element of individual identity to a major determinant of personal identity; sexuality was used "as a mode of specification of individuals."[51]

Doctors defined sexuality as being "by nature…a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalizing intervention." Foucault found that this assumption operated especially frequently in the case of women, the hysterization of whose bodies served as one of the "great strategic unities which…formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex." In the hands of the medical profession, "the feminine body was analyzed—qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it."[52]

The deployment of sexuality was used "in the formation of a political ordering of life," Foucault contended.[53] Although referring specifically to a political ordering involving the bourgeoisie and the working classes, Foucault's analysis is perhaps even more appropriate for the dynamics of power ordering men and women. As sexuality constituted personal—including political—identity, and as female sexuality was said to contain an intrinsic pathology, women's continuing disqualification from the political process now rested upon their sexuality and sexual organization. In order, therefore, to be

recognized as individuals qualified to participate in political life, suffragists had, necessarily, to challenge and overturn cultural constructions of femininity and female sexuality. They did so utilizing what Foucault called "reverse discourses," or discourses of resistance that often incorporated the vocabulary and categories of the dominant discourse. In this context, given, as Foucault argued, that sexuality is one of those power relations "endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies," the suffragist preoccupation with sexual issues takes on immense significance. Feminists recognized that sexuality serves, as Foucault declared, "as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power," and they focused their demands for power in the political sphere around demands for power in the private, sexual sphere, where they perceived power and powerlessness to have their roots.[54]

THIS STUDY represents another approach to the suffrage movement—indeed, to the entire women's movement of the second half of the nineteenth century. I have listened to the arguments of the women as they presented their ideas and explained and justified their efforts, and I have analyzed the language they employed in the course of their movement. The individuals presented here belong overwhelmingly to the middle classes. Despite the contributions made to suffrage by working-class women, middle-class women constituted the vast majority of suffragists. As Jill Liddington and Jill Norris have demonstrated, working-class feminists often advanced an agenda quite different from that of the feminists discussed here; their demands centered on work-related issues such as equal pay.[55] Moreover, this is not a social history of feminism but an intellectual/cultural history. Because I am interested in "discourses" and ideology, this work focuses upon the articulate leaders of the feminist movement, those who led organizations or wrote about their cause.

When I refer to "feminists," I necessarily mean these articulate women, not the rank and file. (Though the term "feminism" did not come into general use until 1890 or so, I employ "feminist" to describe individuals who were active in the women's movement before that date.) Though few, they were the ones who defined the issues; though unrepresentative of even those women who followed them, they were the ones whose debates and arguments composed the feminist discourse.

Some of the leaders and theorists of the women's movement were active for the fifty-odd years required to win the vote. Most of them, though certainly not all, belonged psychologically as well as generationally to one of three cohorts of suffragists: those who pioneered in the struggle for women's rights, born before 1850; those born between 1850 and 1870, thus coming of age before 1890; and those born after 1870, who cut their first political teeth after 1890. Differences of attitude and behavior between and among the individuals of these three groups certainly did exist. But all the women grappled with the same issues pertaining to sexuality, and though they might disagree fundamentally with one another over certain points, all involved themselves in an attack upon the ideology of separate spheres.

The views and beliefs held by feminists reflected, for the most part, those of society at large. As general social values altered, so—often—did the mores of a new cohort of feminists. This situation might have produced problems within the movement, but it also stimulated growth and development.

The pioneers of the feminist movement included Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910), Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836–1917), and Sophia Jex-Blake (1840–1912), the three women most instrumental in breaking down the barriers to women in the profession of medicine in the 1860s and 1870s. Though preoc cupied with the medical movement, they gave much time, energy, and support to other feminist campaigns. Garrett Anderson, for

instance, joined the WSPU, marched on Parliament, and was spared a prison term only through the intervention of her sister, Millicent. Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904), Josephine Butler (1828–1906), Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy (1834–1919?), Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847–1929), and Frances Swiney (1847–1922) were active from the beginning in demanding and organizing for educational and employment reforms for women, the Married Women's Property Acts, the suffrage, and various social purity causes—such as the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts or the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Almost all of them came from respectable, middle-class, Dissenting or Evangelical families. For women of their time, they were unusually well educated, though not necessarily formally so, and they tended to espouse a Liberal or Radical philosophy. Members of their family were very often politically active and were even political and social "insiders."

Three of these pioneers—Blackwell, Cobbe, and Jex-Blake— never married, which no doubt facilitated their ability to devote so much time to the Cause. Garrett Anderson married only after she completed the arduous preparation for her degree. Fawcett, although she participated in various campaigns in the 1870s and 1880s, did not take on the full-time responsibilities of the presidency of the NUWSS until after her husband, Henry Fawcett, had died. Butler had been active in the North of England Council, which sought to increase educational opportunities for women, in the 1860s, but she did not immerse herself in the CD Acts repeal campaign until after (and as a result of) her young daughter's death. Her sons lived at school by that time, and her husband, George Butler, subordinated his personal and professional needs to those of his wife's great crusade. Swiney's six children had become adults by the time she presided over the Cheltenham Affiliated Society of the NUWSS. Where there were demanding husbands or small children, these women could not direct all their attention to feminist

demands. As a result of Elmy's attempt to do justice to both the Cause and her young son, the latter, according to Sylvia Pankhurst, did not fare as well as he might have.[56]

Writing in 1916, Wilma Meikle identified this group of women as the "old" suffragists. Referring specifically to issues of sex and sexuality, she explained that "the old were women who had concealed their sufferings in youth and had nervously whispered their complaints in middle age, until at last they impetuously gave tongue. They were women who might be vulgar for a cause and in the exalted spirit of martyrdom (and quite frequently were), yet remained essentially ladies or 'ladylike.'" In contrast to younger feminists, these older suffragists, by virtue of the "gentility of their minds[,] shrank from much that for a later generation was part of the essential tissue of feminism."[57]

Despite "the gentility of their minds," and the intolerance of society, many of these women did participate in public discussion of sexual issues. In its earliest days, however, the organized feminist movement consisted of a number of discrete campaigns. Property rights, higher education, admission to the medical profession, the vote, and custody rights to children made up much of the feminist agenda; but matters such as the age of consent, the double standard of morality, and prostitution also commanded a great deal of the pioneers' time and energy. Because they feared that demands pertaining to sexuality might negatively influence the success of their campaigns for more conventional rights, feminists at first kept the two sets of demands separate, even though the personnel involved in each campaign were often the same. Gradually, as the legal and institutional obstacles to women's equality with men fell, sexual issues and the vote came increasingly to occupy center stage.

By the 1880s, in large part because of the impact of the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, public discussion of sexual problems and issues had become more acceptable. The second cohort of feminists—those born

between 1850 and 1870—both benefited from and contributed to this looser atmosphere. These were the "New Women," less reticent than many of the earlier feminists to complain of sexual wrongs or to make demands pertaining to women's sexual needs. With the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885, which raised the age of consent for girls and made procuring a criminal offense, and the repeal of the CD Acts in 1886, social purity concerns that had so dominated the feminists' discourses of resistance gave way to attacks on marriage and the double standard of morality. The participating women included Sarah Grand (1854–1943), Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), Mona Caird (1858– 1932), Helena Swanwick (1864–1939), Nina Boyle (1866–1943), and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (1867–1954).

Grand, who left her husband in 1890, wrote prolifically and served as the mayor of Bath six times.[58] Schreiner, a radical feminist and a writer, was the confidante and intimate friend of such diverse personalities as Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx, and Cecil Rhodes. Her most famous work, *The Story of an African Farm,* was published in 1883. Caird, who married in 1877, was a journalist who scandalized the British public with her assault on marriage in the 1880s. Swanwick was one of the first to obtain a college degree from Girton at Cambridge. She served as editor of *Common Cause* from 1909 until 1912 when she left, "too advanced" for the rest of the Executive Board of the NUWSS.[59] Boyle, carrying her demand for the inclusion of women in the power of the state to a degree beyond most other suffragists, helped to found the first women's police force in England during the First World War.[60] Pethick Lawrence, with her husband Frederick, virtually financed the WSPU until their ouster by the dictatorial Pankhursts.

The youngest generation of suffragists was born roughly between 1870 and 1880; these women were in their twenties when militancy burst upon the Edwardian scene, bringing excitement and urgency to the Cause. Among

them were Cicely Hamilton (1872–1952), A.Maude Royden (1876–1956), Teresa Billington- Greig (1877–1964), Christabel Pankhurst (1880–1958), and F.W. Stella Browne (1882–1955). They were, for the most part, college-educated, affiliated in some fashion with the Labour Party, and—out of either necessity or political commitment—worked to support or to help support themselves.

Hamilton, an actress, playwright, and novelist, never married. Nor did Christabel Pankhurst, who held a law degree from Owens College, a precursor to the University of Manchester. Teresa Billington, who received her education through Manchester University extension classes, taught in the Manchester elementary-school system until recruited by Emmeline Pankhurst to establish a branch of the WSPU in London. She later married Frederick Greig. Maude Royden received her B.A. from Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and became an Anglican preacher. She served on the Executive Committee of the NUWSS. For some forty years she lived in the home of the man she loved, Hudson Shaw, and his wife Effie in what can only be described as a platonic *menage à trois*. When Effie died in 1944, Royden and Shaw, an ordained Anglican minister, married; he died two months later.[61] Browne had joined the Divorce Law Reform Union by 1912, the Malthusian League by 1914, and helped to found the Abortion Law Reform Association in 1936. Clearly far more radical than the feminists of the mainstream suffrage campaign, she represents rather the branch of the women's movement associated with *The Freewoman,* a provocative newspaper that appeared in November of 1911.

This newest generation of suffragists distinguished themselves from their foremothers by their great willingness to discuss and tackle—in public—problems relating to sex and sexuality. Meikle related that these women, as university students, had "pored over" the works of George Bernard Shaw and H.G.Wells "and at

last came out into the world earnestly convinced that there was something certainly wonderful and possibly glorious about this mystery called sex and that it was their business to discover it." Armed with these ideas, and observing around them a great deal of dissatisfaction with sexual relations as they currently existed, these suffragists "saw that sexual problems were the core of feminism."[62] Because the suffrage campaign had become a mass movement by 1910, feminist concerns about sex and sexuality permeated social discourse and sometimes dominated public debate. Those problems articulated by older feminists— prostitution, venereal disease, marriage, and the legal and moral double standard—were now joined by discussions of menstruation, child-bearing, sexual assault, incest, homosexuality, sexual pleasure for women, and birth control, and were aired in a manner and to a degree not possible earlier.

The period covered in this study then, 1860–1914, spans three generations of feminists. Despite the differences among and between the women of each group, however, the feminist critique of separate sphere ideology embodied a certain consistency. Chapter I identifies the ideological context within which physicians and scientists branded women "the Sex." Chapters II through V show how feminists sought to eliminate such a characterization by attacking the institutions of power (knowledge) that embodied and perpetuated it. According to the feminist analysis, these institutions—prostitution, marriage, medicine, and law—enslaved women and provided a protective cover under which men were able to indulge their sexual proclivities in violation of the very terms of their profession, be it husband, doctor, lawyer, or Member of Parliament. In launching their critique, feminists focused on the inherent hypocrisy and contradictions of separate sphere ideology in both theory and prac-tice, arguing that it permitted and encouraged attitudes and behavior diametrically opposed to those it purported to assert.