

# Text and Imagery in Suffrage Propaganda

## Norman Watson

### **Abstract**

*This study uses one of Britain's finest collections of suffrage-related memorabilia to examine the impact imagery made on the historic campaign to win votes for women. Focusing on the period of destructive suffragette activity in the opening years of the twentieth century, the paper uses contemporary images to explore the way women were represented in pro- and anti-suffrage iconography. At its core are picture postcards whose "Golden Age" coincided with the heightened period of militancy. These are used to illustrate and explain how women suffragists were portrayed pictorially to an expanding Edwardian audience. It shows how women's suffrage organisations harnessed the propaganda value of picture postcards as a visual corrective to what they saw as a misleading image of their campaign orchestrated by anti-suffrage opponents; and also how postcard illustrations were diverted by anti-suffragists to show that women's votes would prove disastrous for family life and society at large. The paper also demonstrates how early postcards communicated political messages while at the same time providing an "eyewitness" commentary on the campaign for votes with an immediacy that brought alive the vitality of the movement. The paper concludes that the verbal debate of the campaign was tightly bound to the imagery used to develop it in pictorial form as both suffragists and anti-suffragists diverted the powerful propaganda possibilities of picture postcards to their own political ends.*

The votes for women campaign convulsed Britain in the opening years of the twentieth century. The legacy it left offers an image of suffragettes chained to railings and going on hunger strike, of noisy public protests and a virtual war with the State as women doggedly pursued their struggle for voting rights. It was a headlining campaign which "slowly undermined England's parliamentary structure until, but for the providential intervention of a world war, it would certainly have collapsed."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, by quiet petition, or protests in the street, or by premeditated militant action, women in Scotland also fought hard for the right to vote. Some of Britain's biggest suffragette protests rocked Edwardian Scotland. Political meetings were disrupted, politicians hounded, and acts of militancy – worsening as militancy gained momentum – took place across the country.<sup>2</sup> Scotland was also the scene of suffragette imprisonments, hunger strikes and forcible feeding as the women's struggle for electoral equality brought window smashing, burnings and bombings and audacious attempts to disrupt royal visits.

What has never been examined are the links between the votes-for-women campaign and the way women were represented in pro- and anti-suffrage iconography in Scotland.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mayall, Laura E. Nym, *The Militant Suffrage Movement, Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on Dundee militancy see Watson, Norman, *Dundee's Suffragettes, Their Remarkable Struggle to Win Votes for Women* (Dundee, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> To the best of the author's knowledge there has been no study of suffragette propaganda related to the Scottish votes-for-women campaign.



**Fig. 1.** 'The Suffragettes Coat of Arms'. Note the vindictive, furious look of the suffragette "spinster" and her unfeminine, angular appearance. Woman power is anticipated by the downtrodden man at her feet.

This paper uses contemporary images from this extraordinary period to examine these links. In doing so, it will show how the verbal debate of the women's campaign was tightly bound to the imagery used to develop it in pictorial form. A particular and novel focus of this study will be its use of contemporary picture postcards – whose "Golden Age" coincided with the heightened period of suffrage militancy – to illustrate and explain how women suffragists were portrayed pictorially to an expanding Edwardian audience.

Three aspects of the use of postcard imagery are particularly relevant during the years of suffrage militancy, approximately from 1905 to 1914. Firstly, women's suffrage organisations harnessed the propaganda value of picture postcards to correct what they saw as a misleading image of their campaign orchestrated by anti-suffrage opponents.<sup>4</sup> In an imaginative and innovative selling of their cause, postcards were used to show the charismatic personalities of the movement's leaders, their academic achievements and position in society, and what they stood for. Other cards were intended to demonstrate not only the strength of support for the cause, but

also carried the message that its sympathisers were not the threat to society portrayed in anti-suffrage imagery.

Secondly, postcards promoted by anti-suffragists typically characterised votes-for-women campaigners as embittered spinsters or as combative masculine figures. They were shown as hysterical and incompetent. They were intellectually men's inferiors and emotionally unstable. Their husbands were hen-pecked and their homes neglected. Conveyed by unflattering illustration, as shown in Figure 1, these themes were designed to show that women's votes would prove disastrous for family life and society at large.

Thirdly, postcard publishers independently documented what was going on, providing an idea of what the everyday life of a suffragist could be like – from selling newspapers, to interrupting meetings and rattling a money-box. Through illustration, caricature or photographs, postcards were also helpful in overcoming complexities in the distinction between militant and constitutional suffragists and their competing strategies – though at times they probably contributed to public

<sup>4</sup> Sheppard, Alice, *Cartooning for Suffrage* (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1994), p. 5.



**Fig. 2.** 'The Suffragette Nails her Colours to the Mast.' Published by Raphael Tuck & Sons, c 1907. The sender writes: "This is a specimen of the girl you left behind – and no loss

confusion over the campaign.<sup>5</sup> The question is why was suffragette militancy – defiance of the law – deemed necessary?

Women's lives had been transformed as the 1900s began. Some had voted in municipal elections since 1869; they had been allowed to join school boards in 1870; and from 1894 women were represented on local councils. More had gone out to work, not only in factories, but as typists, clerks and bookkeepers. There was a growing demand for nurses and for female staff in department stores, offices and elementary schools. Graduate women had become teachers and accountants, lawyers and doctors. And as women had grown independent in outlook and had made strides into hitherto closed professions, so their financial and social situation had improved. But the new economic independence that employment provided was not matched by political power. Women had gained a voice, but remained voteless at parliamentary elections. And partly militancy was adopted because the media and the public had largely lost interest in the slow-

paced meetings and petitions to Parliament of the Victorian campaign for women's votes. Newspapers in the new century rarely reported suffrage gatherings and often refused to publish articles and letters written by ageing franchise supporters trotting out familiar old arguments. They were tired of parliamentary debates on the private members' Bills on suffrage which were invariably talked out and ran out of time. And so, "By 1906 the public activities of these constitutional suffrage societies aroused almost the same interest as a vestry meeting in Great Snoring."<sup>6</sup>

Some women eventually had their fill of the delaying tactics and the inertia of political stalemate. They were frustrated, angry and impatient for progress. In 1905, Emmeline Pankhurst's newly-formed Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) decided on high-profile action to generate the impact and publicity it felt was needed to win the vote.<sup>7</sup> The arrest and imprisonment of Mrs Pankhurst's

<sup>5</sup> The postcards illustrated in the paper are from the author's collection. For an extensive record of this collection see [www.womenslib.org](http://www.womenslib.org). This site contains a list of 500 sources for the study of the women's suffrage movement in Scotland.

<sup>6</sup> McDonald, Ian, *Vindication! A Postcard History of the Women's Movement* (London, McDonald/Bellow, 1989), p. 62. This work shows how postcards were used in women's history generally, from Victorian times to the Thatcher era.

<sup>7</sup> The start of militancy is described in most suffrage histories. The best account of the individuals and events in the campaign is Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement, A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (University College London Press, 1999). The Scottish campaign is best described in Leneman, Leah, *A Guid Cause, The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland* (Aberdeen University Press, 1991).

daughter Christabel after she had deliberately interrupted a political meeting shocked the nation. For the first time in Britain, women had used violence in an attempt to win the vote.

The adoption of militancy as a tactic had worked. The incident attracted widespread publicity. Sympathisers flocked to join the WSPU and other suffrage organisations.<sup>8</sup> Coincidentally, postcards with pictures on one side of them had been sanctioned by the British postal authorities in 1902, just in time to chart this increased political activity. They were cheap to buy and send, simple for all classes to use and delivered by postmen four times a day. They quickly became a favoured means of communication. From a standing start 800 million postcards were sent through the post in Great Britain by 1910 and 900 million by 1913.<sup>9</sup>

What is under-researched, however, is how early postcards communicated political messages and how, during this explosive period of women's history, they provided a commentary on the campaign for women's votes with an immediacy that brought alive the vitality of the movement.

Importantly, postcards were diverted by suffragists and anti-suffragists to their own political ends. In such hands they were a potent new communication and propaganda tool. They provided a cutting edge to the campaign to win votes – much more so than other contemporary issues, such as Home Rule for Scotland, Free Trade or tax reforms – and in doing so they left a wealth of visual evidence for historians.<sup>10</sup> At first, however, postcard publishers had difficulty portraying militant suffragettes. There was no television and still very few



**Fig. 3.** 'Our Next Parliament.' Published by Cynicus, Newport-on-Tay, postally used July 1910.

<sup>8</sup> The arrest of Christabel Pankhurst was widely reported and recorded. See, for example, Pugh, Martin, *The Pankhursts* (Penguin, London, 2001), pp. 128-9.

<sup>9</sup> Tickner, Lisa, *The Spectacle of Women, Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 50.

photographs in newspapers. Postcard artists had little idea of what the women protesting for the vote looked like and thus had to draw on the symbolism available to them to avoid appearing obscure. They did this by recalling illustrations in popular Victorian and Edwardian periodicals, such as the satirical magazine *Punch*. In particular they reproduced a likeness of a prominent women's campaigner, Lydia Becker, who had died in 1890. Remarkably, many post-1905 cards show suffragettes who look very much like this woman from nearly two decades earlier – always in steel-rimmed spectacles, piled-up hair and in a Tyrolean hat reminiscent of those worn by her German father.<sup>11</sup> Figure 2 depicts a woman in Becker's hat, hair and glasses. Her "masculinity" and combative form, however, represents the new age of militancy. Such cards showed how suffrage iconography was obliged to place itself in relation to the long-standing tradition of political caricature. And while they marked a rapid response by publishers to the start of militant action, there was clearly confusion about what votes for women would bring – which was soon reflected in the lampooning imagery on contemporary postcards.

Figure 3, by the Scottish publisher Cynicus, predicts a bickering females-dominated Parliament. Women swap punches, some are sleeping, the usual presence of the female battleaxe and weak male is seen, one woman is even breast feeding. And Lydia Becker is still there at the back, twenty years after her death, Harry Potter glasses and hair in a bun. Cynicus feels into the dark void of the unknown to suppose that any parliament involving women would become a mish-mash of manly and muscular females arguing among themselves. Anti-suffrage cards neither minced their words nor diluted their pictorial representations of what they viewed as women acting beyond their "recognised" station in society.



**Fig. 4.** 'Oh! Did He!' Published by The London View Company, c 1909.

<sup>10</sup> Few Scottish Home Rule postcards are known, although the Free Trade campaign was covered by national publishers to an extent.

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, p. 19.



**Fig. 5.** Illustrated by Lawson Wood, issued by The Carlton Publishing Company, c 1912.

Entrenched visual themes show hen-pecked husbands and neglected homes; suffragists fighting with policemen, appearing in court or being ridiculed in public. Women are often caricatured as ugly, hysterical, manly or incompetent. In Figure 4, for instance, the umbrella-wielding women reflect the fear among anti-suffrage men of losing power to women. The umbrellas, by implication, could be brandished ferociously to emphasise arguments or wielded as weapons. Images like this were used as doom-laden warnings of an impending matriarchal society.<sup>12</sup> Another common anti-suffragist argument was that women were intellectually men's inferiors and emotionally unstable. Postcard publishers cruelly lampooned them by showing scientists comparing male and female brains – with the women's examples ridiculously smaller. Figure 5 shows the most masculine of suffragists being told by an inmate of an asylum, "You're not mad, you're only a fool." Such images

inadvertently drew comparisons between the lunatic and the suffragette, implying that the latter should have more right to vote than the former.<sup>13</sup> A further theme regularly highlighted in Edwardian-era cards was the idea that gaining the vote would mean the tearing apart of family life. Cards regularly portrayed domestic strife, or the consequences of women abandoning the home simply because they were able to vote. To this end, anti-suffragists drew heavily on the Victorian ideology of separate gendered spheres and claimed votes for women would prove a disaster for families.<sup>14</sup> Such pictorial contempt was commonplace and had to be endured by women over many years.

With the verbal arguments of the campaign bound up with such potent imagery, suffrage leaders urgently needed to counter hurtful depictions of their activities and ambitions and the public perceptions they were creating. Postcards were so popular and some caricaturists so fashionable and avidly collected that hostile cards inevitably had damaging effects on the message the women were trying to get across. The obvious way for women to deflect and demythologise derogatory anti-feminism was to orchestrate their own propaganda campaign using pictorial postcards. This they did from the early years of the Edwardian campaign by producing cards showing photographic portraits of their leaders

<sup>12</sup> Tickner, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, Kathryn, 'Postcards, teacups, badges and buckles; the suffragettes used every available medium to bring their message home', in *New Statesman*, No 132, Oct 13, 2003. This article reviewed the Art for Votes' Sake exhibition at The Women's Library, London, in 2003. For a discussion of suffrage shops and retailing, see Mercer, John, 'Commercial places, public spaces: suffragette shops and the public sphere', *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 7 (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Tickner, p. 154.

purposefully stage-managed to reverse the adverse publicity of the anti-suffragists. Figures 6-8 below help to explain what the suffrage societies hoped to achieve by publishing and circulating “womanly woman” cards in the public arena. Figure 6 shows Mary Gawthorpe, who was sent by the WSPU to organise branches and recruit members in Scotland. Teresa Billington-Greig, one of those to split from the WSPU in 1907 to form the Women’s Freedom League, is shown in Figure 7. Gawthorpe and Billington-Greig were high-profile ‘missionaries’ in Scotland during the early part of the campaign, where they staged public meetings and wrote many letters to the Press. The formal portraits on these official cards are deliberate and are skilfully designed to introduce these leaders to a wider audience as women worthy of voting rights. The women are studiously posed and elegantly dressed. Both Gawthorpe and Billington-Greig hold books, the latter standing erect and dressed in a fine gown. The message conveyed through their imagery is that the campaign is being led by sensitive, serious-minded and well-educated women.



**Fig. 6- 8.** Official WSPU cards, postally used May, 1907-08. On Fig. 8 the sender writes, “I send you a photo of one of the ‘Suffragettes’. E & H were over hearing them last night, perfectly enthusiastic about them, they are much in evidence in Dundee. There is a spate of oratory just now.” The reference is to the presence of over 20 national suffrage leaders in Dundee as part of an organised campaign to prevent Winston Churchill taking one of the city’s parliamentary seats in a by-election.

In Figure 8 the WSPU leader Christabel Pankhurst is shown in a postcard published by her organisation looking soulful and vulnerable – though extremely fashionable in an embroidered gown and art nouveau jewellery. The fact that Christabel was beautiful, persuasive and charismatic as well as fiercely intelligent – note her law degree is shown – offered women a heroic personality, and visual

depictions of Mrs Pankhurst's eldest daughter were powerful instruments in winning sympathy for the cause.<sup>15</sup>

Cards showing suffrage leaders were sold at suffrage shops and branches and distributed for publicity. Even the verbatim WSPU pamphlet account of the 1909 trial of Emmeline Pankhurst informed its readers that postcards were available of luminaries such as the Pankhurst sisters, "General" Drummond and Annie Kenney, all priced at one penny each. Thus, the power of postcard imagery was harnessed by the women to publicise their perspective and to divest themselves of the damaging characterisations which clung to their public presence. More practically, the cards served a useful purpose in raising funds.<sup>16</sup>

Another way in which suffragists countered demoralising postcard propaganda was to ensure there was a documentary record of their public protests. In postcards of marches and processions, the idea was not only to demonstrate the strength of support for their cause, but to show the types of women who stood for it. Spectators, journalists – and postcard publishers – could see that the women in suffrage parades were not the manly shrews described by the Press and depicted on postcards. They were disciplined and passionate, but also stylishly dressed and exuding femininity.



**Fig. 9.** 'Suffragists leaving King's Park, 5th Oct '07, Edinburgh Real-photo postcard.

Figure 9 is a photographic postcard of the women's franchise procession in Edinburgh in October 1907. The card provides evidence of the scale of the event and shows large numbers of spectators. Through the distribution of these rapidly-issued souvenirs the women's cause was circulated and publicised to a new audience. This type of suffrage imagery is propaganda in the sense that it was to meet the aims of a specific political campaign. By their orderly behaviour and by wearing academic gowns and elegant clothes on such processions, suffragists refuted the suggestion that women were intellectually incapable or emotionally unstable. They presented themselves as educated, mature and reasonable.

<sup>15</sup> Christabel as a "dazzling pin-up" is discussed in Melanie Phillips' article 'The Pankhursts' sexual terrorism', *Daily Mail*, 16 October, 2003.

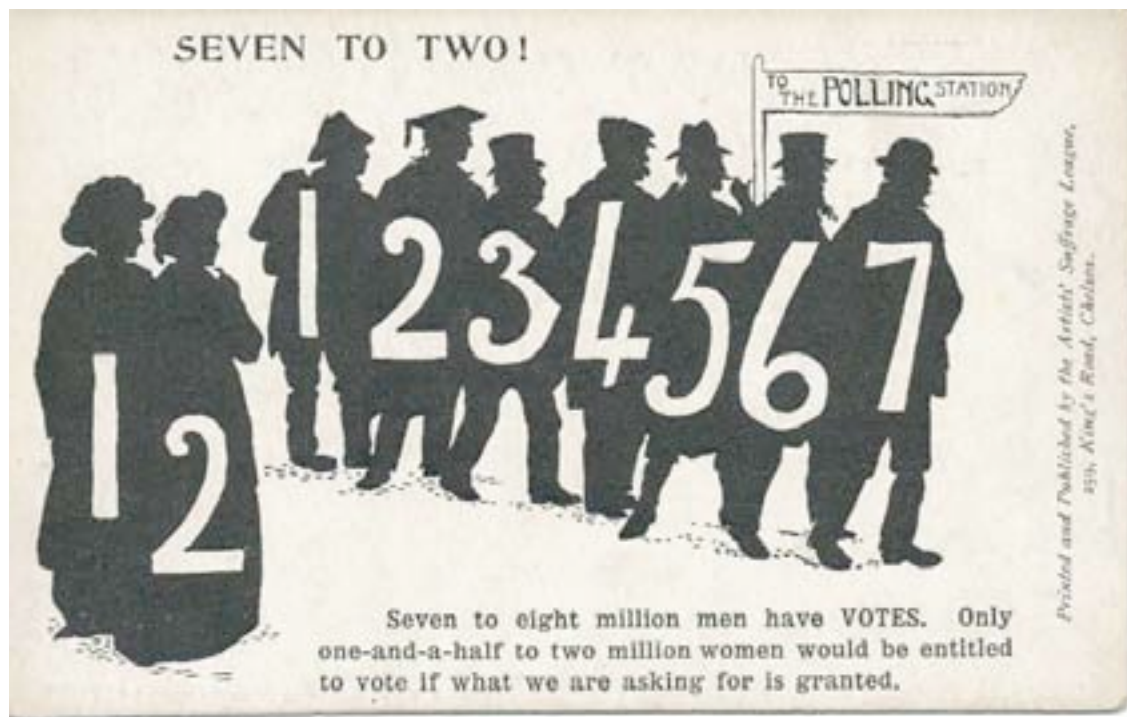
<sup>16</sup> *The Trial of the Suffragette Leaders* (The Women's Press, London, 1909).



Their participation in huge numbers in mass demonstrations – half a million at Hyde Park in 1908 – also helped to defeat a frequent accusation that most women did not want the vote.

Postcard scenes of peaceful protests added support to the women's argument that the vote would strengthen and not destabilise society. And with every bit of good publicity, growing public opinion put pressure on MPs across the country to support their cause in parliamentary debates and franchise Bills.

And yet it was only after techniques for postcard production improved that outdoor events were captured by this “real photograph” format. The card shown in Figure 9 was issued in the first year of James Valentine's experiments with photographic issues and when the Dundee firm was on the cusp of becoming Britain's largest postcard producer.<sup>17</sup> It is also the only known record of the 1907 Edinburgh demonstration and predates cards of London suffrage marches. Its usefulness to the historian is that it recorded a newsworthy event as it happened. It was the live satellite broadcast of its day, winning a new audience wherever it was sent. Most histories depict the suffrage campaign in terms of the written word or spoken form. Postcards, however, show that art was an important medium for suffrage campaigners, who believed it had power to shape thought, focus debates and stimulate action.



**Fig. 10.** A postcard produced by the Artists' Suffrage League uses the easy-to-understand visual 'prop' of numbers on silhouetted figures of seven men and two women for the Parliamentary Bill proposed in 1909.

<sup>17</sup> Cronshaw, Andrew, *Old Dundee Picture Postcards* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 15.

To this end, the Artists' Suffrage League was established in 1907 to harness the skills of artistic supporters for the purposes of political propaganda through suffrage imagery. Another group of women, the Suffrage Atelier, was established in February 1909, and unselfishly gave up individual careers as artists or art teachers – and in many cases reputations – to help the cause. Both the Atelier and the Artists' Suffrage League used their members' skills to produce a repertoire of creative posters, banners and postcards in support of the cause, and in doing so placed a public emphasis on the usefulness of imagery to counter stereotypes of femininity and the hegemonic order.<sup>18</sup> Another women's group to use postcard propaganda as instant visual communication was the Women Writers' Suffrage League. Figure 11 is a Women Writers' Suffrage League card from 1909 showing a black ink and wash representation of a blindfolded female figure



**Fig. 11.** Women Writers' Suffrage League card, c. 1910.

holding the scales of liberty and sword of justice. Below her a kneeling woman attempts to reach Justice, but is held back by a figure labelled “prejudice.”

Such cards demonstrate how creatively-gifted women committed to suffrage ideals organised art to work for their side of the argument. This allowed them to counter narrow stereotypical treatment in other published work and to shape opinion from their own perspective. This was precisely the objective of the Atelier and Artists' Suffrage League. They achieved it in two distinct ways – firstly by producing evocative cards which clearly showed male oppression or cruelty that galvanised sympathy for the cause or pity for the injustices of women involved. Secondly, they used satire and humour to ease the communication of the message presented to those buying and receiving cards. As women fought back through the power of visual propaganda, the use of colour became part of the suffrage pictorial arsenal. Improved lithographic techniques in mass colour printing allowed pro- and anti-suffrage campaigners to express protest in the form of colour pamphlets, banners, badges, posters and, of course, postcards. Society members were urged to wear adopted “colours” to show allegiance and to publicise the women's campaign – and shops stocking products in “the colours” were promised patronage by the women.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 18. Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement, A Reference Guide 1866-1928*, pp. 16-17, 667.

<sup>19</sup> Atkinson, Diane, *The Purple, White & Green, Suffragettes in London, 1906-1914* (London, London Museum Publications, 1992), p. 15. See also, by the same author, *Funny Girls, Cartooning for Equality* (Penguin, 1997). This publication was issued to mark the exhibition of the same name at the Fawcett Library, Metropolitan Museum, London in 1997.

By 1909 the WSPU colours of white, green and purple had gained widespread recognition. White signified purity, green hope and purple dignity or loyalty – and these colours were used to construct the identity of the militant organisation and to maximise its presence. Colour not only helped women align themselves publicly to the cause in the clothes they wore, the letters and cards they sent – even the bicycles they rode. In the WSPU's case it offered a military veneer to the “fight” for votes in the sense that “the colours” were adopted as a uniform. In Figure 12, the woman's friend – the cat – is portrayed in front of WSPU colours, a reminder to those who received the card, or avidly collected postcards, of the women's cause. As the card suggests, however, the movement also had claws and could bite! After one violent demonstration in London in 1910, *The Times* reported that “six police officers had to go on the sick list with bites and scratches.”<sup>20</sup>



Fig.12. 'I want my Vote'. Postally used 1910.

Catherine Flood has noted that the suffragette use of colour “claims a place in the history of design for its use of what we have come to call ‘corporate image building’”. Flood stated: “The colours contributed to the impression of style and dignity and inspired a whole suffrage fashion that was followed profitably by entrepreneurs outside of the movement.”<sup>21</sup> Some publishers of comic postcards had no political axe to grind, however, and took a more whimsical view of the women's campaign. Among them was the largest postcard producer in Britain – James Valentine of Dundee. Valentine produced cards on a vast scale, but they were not consciously propagandist and few appear vindictive or antagonistic towards the women's campaign. Note, for example, the elegance of the woman in the background in Figure 15.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 23 November 1910.

<sup>21</sup> Flood, Catherine, *The Visual Campaign for the Vote* (Mary Evans Picture Library, undated internet article, viewed 2008), pp. 2-3. For an impression of the types of campaign material sold by the WSPU and other suffrage organisations, see also Diane Atkinson's *The Purple, White and Green, Suffragettes in London, 1906-1914*.



Fig. 13 'General Election'



Fig 14. 'Presented at Court'.

Yet although many of these cards were not intentionally anti-suffrage, they were unconsciously prejudiced and anti-feminist – and, of course, women who objected to the images were accused of having no sense of humour. Figures 13 and 14 show two typical cards of this type, both by William Ritchie of Edinburgh. Commercial cards also record in their imagery actual events and thus acted as publicity tools in the verbal arguments over granting the franchise to women. For example, Figure 15 “Safe in the Arms of the Policeman” echoes a notorious incident in 1908 when Mrs Pankhurst was arrested outside Buckingham Palace (shown in Figure 16). The incident and her rough handling by the police caused a public outcry in Parliament and across the country.



Fig. 15. 'Safe in the Arms of the Policeman.' Published by Valentine, 1908.



**Fig. 16.** Press photograph of the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst by the Metropolitan Police, 1910.

By 1909 imprisoned suffragettes were harshly designated "Second Division" prisoners – and this became a popular postcard theme. Political prisoners were normally given First Division status, in other words above the criminal fraternity, and were allowed to retain their own clothes and privileges such as writing paper and reading materials. Denied these rights, suffragettes were forced into grim prison overalls and were refused all privileges. In turn, the postcards of the time characterised convicted women as second-class citizens, their stark visual images reminding the public of the prisoners' predicament.



**Fig. 17.** 'Ladies Only!'

"Ladies only!" reads the caption of Figure 17, which uses the second-class railway compartment to remind the government of a public relations blunder in making the women appear as imprisoned martyrs. Worse was to come. Black Friday, in the autumn of 1909, was one of the most disturbing days in the history of women's politics. Members of a WSPU deputation were roughly handled, hurled to the ground and beaten during a six-hour struggle with police in central London. The violence was captured in contemporary postcards – and sometimes on the protest messages they carried.



**Fig. 18.** 'Mendicant. "Can You Spare a Copper, Lady?"' From a drawing by Alfred Leete, published by Bamforth & Co, 1910.



**Fig. 19.** 'The Suffragettes get wilder daily and smash shop windows oh so gaily.' Illustrated by Reg Carter, postally used 1912.

"Don't be hard with the suffragette" is the message on the reverse of Figure 18, whose obverse uses illustration and a weak pun to echo actual events. Addressed to a police station by a suffrage supporter, its sender asks the local constabulary to be lenient with a woman held in custody and adds "Votes for Women". Frustrated and angry at being denied the vote, on 1 March 1912, women took hammers and stones and broke shop windows in the West End of London in an organised window-smashing raid spread over three days. Figure 19 light-heartedly reflects events and the damage caused as 'toffee' hammers became the women's weapon of choice and window smashing became routine.

There were no photographs of militant action – indeed precious little hard evidence of it. Instead, postcard illustrators conjured up what they took it to be, and their interpretation served not only to provide a record of events, but accessed parts of the public that the complex debate of newspaper columns failed to reach. Between 1909 and 1912 militant attacks had concentrated on public property and the WSPU had been concerned with converting public opinion. After the window smashing campaign in 1912 the WSPU began to target

private property in a deliberate attempt to antagonise the public, believing that people's desire for order would pressure the government into reform. By this time real photographic postcards were acting as the 'outside broadcasts' for the most sensational attacks on properties.



**Fig. 20.** 'Whitekirk Church, burned by Suffragettes, 26th Feb 1914.' Published by William Sanson & Son, Dunbar.

The aftermath of a fire-raising attack on Whitekirk Church in West Lothian



**Fig. 21.** 'A Suffragist Orator'. Published by Miller & Lang, Glasgow, postally used May, 1908.

is shown in Figure 20. Yet the outrage that one of Scotland's best-preserved medieval buildings had been destroyed was quickly countered by suffragists who symbolically compared it to the "medieval torture" of forcible feeding in Scotland's jails.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as the weeks went by, the violent tactics and extensive attacks against property saw much sympathy for the women's cause evaporate. It became almost impossible for the WSPU to hold open public meetings because of the hostility towards its members. Its office in Dundee had its windows broken. In Glasgow, university students marched on a WSPU office in Sauchiehall Street and wrecked the premises. In Edinburgh the WSPU and Women's Freedom League premises were damaged.

Arabella Scott, later to face five weeks of forcible feeding at Perth Prison, recalled: "I remember at one of these public letter boxes I was pouring in some prescribed treacle one day when a

<sup>22</sup> Letters by Janie Allan, now with the National Archives of Scotland, suggest to the Secretary of State for Scotland that the attack on Whitekirk church was in direct consequence of forcible feeding. NAS Criminal Case File HH16/46.

big hefty woman came along and slapped me across the face.”<sup>23</sup>

The public were annoyed, frustrated and angry. Militants were shouted down, chased, verbally and even physically abused. Thus, under the illustrator’s pen in Figure 21 the “spinster” suffragette is almost devoid of feminine attributes – lacking the curves appropriate to femininity. The angles of her body are echoed in the sharpness of her features. Her expression is excitable and vindictive. There is little sympathy now. Unwittingly, the card also reflects the courage of the women who attempted to speak in public at the height of the militant campaign – bravery often noted in the Press. And so, with electoral hopes betrayed, the violence went on; the burning of houses, sports pavilions, seaside piers, churches, arguing and fighting in court rooms, the interruption of State occasions and constant skirmishing with police.<sup>24</sup> And through all of this, militant and non-militant suffragists exploited every medium available to them to ensure that images supporting votes for women circulated as widely as possible as a counterblast to the regiment of monstrous women seen on anti-suffrage propaganda material.

## Conclusion

Pictorial representations became a powerful instrument in winning sympathy to the women’s cause during their incendiary struggle to win the vote – to the extent that in driving forward their campaign through imagery, suffragists developed a visual strategy that was soon copied by organisations around the world.<sup>25</sup> Another important legacy of contemporary postcard iconography is that it provides us with a documentary sense of authenticity. Postcards are our eyewitness accounts of events 100 years ago, as shown by Figures 9 and 20, for example. They had just as vital a function as a corrective to what the suffragettes saw as a misleading and unjust image of them. Harnessed to their cause, postcard propaganda acted to rouse the public to awareness of the existence of the movement, acted to demythologise negative comment and helped to bring pressure to bear on Parliament through public opinion. Conversely, postcard misrepresentation damaged the suffrage cause. It made women appear much worse to the public than they really were. It was an obstacle when it came to making people listen to what the women actually had to say – few would believe that the mad, shrieking creatures of the postcard illustrators actually had sound arguments. A century on, such postcards are more than a reminder of past events. They have a modern-day role and relevancy. In providing easy-to-grasp meaning, they can help raise young people’s consciousness of a previous generation’s sacrifice and contribution to the democracy we enjoy today. They illustrate the ramifications of exclusion from power. They also bring home the

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<sup>23</sup> *My Murky Past*, unpublished memoirs of Arabella Scott, Private Collection.

<sup>24</sup> A comprehensive short summary of this period of militancy is Brian Harrison’s *The Act of Militancy: Violence and the Suffragettes, 1904-1914*, in *Peaceable Kingdom, Stability and Change in Modern Britain*, eds, Michael Bentley and John Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 80-122.

<sup>25</sup> Atkinson, *The Purple, White & Green*, p. 52. See also Flood, p 1.



injustice of the continuing difficulty women face “in winning a sympathetic hearing for their concerns and grievances.”<sup>26</sup>



**Fig. 22.** A postcard captures the campaign in Dundee during the “Churchill” by-election in April 1908.



**Fig. 23.** ‘The Coming Woman’ as seen by the Fife publisher Cynicus (Martin Anderson).

<sup>26</sup> Sheppard, p. 15.

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