'You Have Lost Your Opportunity' British Quakers and the militant phase of the women's suffrage campaign: 1906-1914[1]

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Quaker Studies 2(1997):30-56

Abstract
Quakers are widely believed to have been in the forefront of 19th century social change, and in particular to have been in favour of women's equality. Through consideration of individual and corporate public statements by British Friends during the period of militant campaigning for women to have the parliamentary vote, I show that this perception is inaccurate, largely mythic, and based on generalisation from the actions of a small number of individual Friends. I suggest that Friends' reputation for having been corporately progressive on the question of women's equality is undeserved, based on superficial consideration of the use of the term 'equality', and that the position of the London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends was far more cautious and divided than is generally supposed.

Keywords
suffrage, equality, Quaker, women, reform, militancy

> The equality of men and women in Quakerism was more apparent than real, but the powers open to women were so large compared with their restricted role in other religious -or, for that matter, secular -

> organisations... that they deserve to be regarded as one of the most striking elements in Quaker organisation.
> Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers:* 107

> That it should have been necessary to form a Friends' League for Women's Suffrage seems as strange and anomalous as the formation of a Friends' Prayer League, because the purposes of both leagues would appear to be implicit in the Quaker faith.
> Gertrude Taylor, *The Friend*, 13 February 1914

> *If you Quakers had been true to your colours, you might have led this great army of women; you have lost your opportunity.*
> spoken by a leader of the militants, quoted by Theodora Wilson, reported in *The Friend*, 7 February 1913

In the early phase of the women's suffrage movement (1860s onwards) a number of individual Quaker women were deeply involved and in prominent leadership positions. Jihang Park (1988:157), studying the 1913 *Suffrage Annual and Women's Who's Who* finds that,

> most of the Quaker dynasties such as Clark, Clothier, Fox, Fry, King, Rowntree and Thomasson were represented ... with the notable exception of Cadbury. [2]

It is surprising that Park makes no mention of the Brights, a formidable 'dynasty' in relation to women's suffrage, as Sandra Holton (1994) in particular has documented. But, as I shall argue, these were individual Quaker women acting out of their personal concern and commitment. Even though they saw their activism in this matter as springing directly from their Quaker faith, the Society of Friends [3] as a whole took no position on the matter, nor became involved in any corporate way:

> Until two years ago, probably most people who knew anything of Quaker belief and practice took it for granted that all Friends were in favour of women's suffrage. But a

> conference that took place then showed that it was far otherwise . . . it is a cause of regret to many that our Society, as a body, has not hitherto taken any corporate share in forwarding the Women's Movement, though many individuals have been active workers for the cause. (*The Free Church Suffrage Times*, November 1913)

This is an important historical point because in many modern accounts of the movement there are frequent references to 'the Quakers', with an assumption that the supposed 'equality' of women within Quakerism had led to significant Quaker involvement in the campaign. It is my intention in this paper to demonstrate the inaccuracy of this and I have used as my sources the views expressed by Friends in the public domain. Thus I consider article and correspondence in *The Friend*, *The British Friend* and *The Friends' Quarterly Examiner*; minutes, epistles and other documents of London Yearly Meeting; and other publications by individual Quakers or groups of Friends.

During the early days of the campaign for women's suffrage, the Quaker journals had paid scant attention to the movement, and it was only with the advent of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1906, and the subsequent rise of militancy, that Friends began to show any corporate concern for the issue. *The Friend* (published weekly) and *The British Friend* (published monthly until December 1913) provide something of a running commentary on the attitudes amongst British Friends to the women's suffrage issue: both journals carried news items, minutes and reports of meetings, correspondence, articles and so forth. Both editors printed widely diverging and opposing views on the matter. At times, the editor of *The British Friend* added comments to the end of a letter, indicating that he was in favour of women's suffrage, against militancy and in favour of the Society of Friends taking a stand on the question. *The Friends' Quarterly Examiner* did not seek to be a forum for such an immediate exchange of views. It consisted almost entirely of substantial articles on matters of longer-term concern and hardly ever carried correspondence. During the period 1906-1914 it only carried two articles concerning women's suffrage. It will be seen, therefore, that

the people I quote were writing for a wide audience, and for this paper I have not attempted to compare the public and private 'faces' of the Society of Friends during this period. However, the Society of Friends was, and is, a public body; and people both inside and outside the Society clearly had an interest in what that body of people might, corporately, have to say about the issue of women's suffrage. There is some internal evidence in the journals that those who held what they assumed to be unpopular or minority views may have been reticent about expressing them.

In the period 1906-1914 the debate about women's suffrage within the Society of Friends took place along three principal axes: whether women's suffrage *per se* a good thing or not; whether the Society of Friends as a body take a stand on the matter or not; whether militancy understandable or deplorable. All these strands were intertwined, and threaded through them was the idea of the 'equality' of women in the Society. From its infancy, the Quaker movement had an ideology of the 'spiritual equality' of men and women -that women had souls as men did. In the matter of ministry, of access to the promptings of the Spirit, Quaker women gave vocal ministry in Meeting for Worship, travelled in the ministry and in various ways exercised their equal spiritual authority. In addition, by comparison with the *mores* of the time, they had a high degree of participation in the decision making and general affairs of the Society. However, this was never unanimously accepted, and the degree to which this 'equality' was given practical expression varied widely over time and was a matter of conflict and dissent at various periods. In the way that the term 'equality' is used today, especially in feminist circles, we would have to say that women were never 'equal' in the Society of Friends (see, for instance: Isichei 1970; O'Shea 1992; Punshon 1984). In fact, in the way that the term was already being used in the women's movement in the first decades of this century, in relation to political and social equality with men, it would also be correct to say that women were not 'equal' in Quakerism. The playing out of this debate, the claiming or refuting of 'equality', became an important factor in the decision as to whether or not Quakers should take a corporate stand on the issue of suffrage. There was no Quaker organisation for women's suffrage until

1911, and then it was not an official body of the Society. It is instructive to note that the Friends' Council for Women's Suffrage (which became the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage in 1912) was formed in the same month as the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (*Common Cause,* 12 January 1911); instructive, in that, especially where matters of gender are concerned, Catholics are often thought (perhaps wrongly) to be rather conservative, whereas Quakers are often thought (perhaps wrongly) to be radical and always in the vanguard of social change (see also Mason 1986).

For most of 1906 there was no comment in the Quaker journals on the events in the world at large in relation to women's suffrage. However, and probably not coincidentally, at the Women's Yearly Meeting in May the question was raised as to the merits or otherwise of the women continuing to meet separately from the men. From 1896 the Men's and Women's Yearly Meetings, whilst retaining separate structures, had held joint sessions, but there remained a provision for the women to meet separately and simultaneously with the Men's Yearly Meeting. However, when this occurred, the minutes of the men's meeting remained the official minutes of the Yearly Meeting and in a report of the women's deliberations (*The Friend* 46 (1906):398) we read of considerable disquiet at this. These movements of opinion within the Society reflect wider social forces in society at large. The pressure for change in the decision making structures of the Yearly Meeting came to prominence, and finally achieved some success, in the mid and late 1890s, at the time when the national campaign for women's suffrage had at last succeeded in winning the right for women to vote in local government elections (Holton and Allen 1997). This further disquiet at the persisting lack of parity between the Men's and Women's Yearly Meetings coincided with the upsurge and refocusing of energy among women suffrage campaigners that led to the founding of the WSPU in 1906. In May the following year the Yearly Meeting adopted the proposal that the separate Women's Yearly Meeting should be discontinued, and *The Friend* (47 (1907):397) reported some of the women as having spoken in terms of their lack of 'legislative powers' in the Society of Friends, a most un-Quakerly turn of phrase in relation to Quaker business meetings, and

clearly the result of influence from the world outside.

The agitation in the surrounding society was brought to Friends' attention towards the end of 1906, when obituary notices appeared in both *The British Friend* (15 (1906):309) and *The Friend* (46 (1906): 824) for Priscilla Bright McLaren, a woman of great significance in the suffrage movement (see for instance Holton 1994). Both articles gave significant place to her work for women's causes, in particular suffrage, and the piece in *The British Friend* drew a swift reply from Emily Manners, giving additional information:

> ...only two days before her death, at the request of the Edinburgh National Society for Women's Suffrage, of which she was the President, she dictated a message of sympathy and admiration to the nine women then in prison for their advocacy of the cause of Women's Suffrage. (*The British Friend* 15 (1906):338)

Manners went on to say that she was surprised that Quaker journals had never advocated women's suffrage, given the special position of women within Quakerism. She acknowledged that there was disquiet over the methods of the WSPU, but said that at least they had broken through the wall of silence and indifference; and at the end of her letter is a note from the editor, the first of many in which he gives his own opinion, to say that he agrees with her. There is an irony here, which Manners points to, that the militant action which many Quakers so deplored was the vehicle for at last mobilising members of the Society in significant numbers to turn their attention to the questions posed by the women's suffrage campaign.

February 1907 saw the deployment of mounted police against a deputation of some 400 women, organised by the WSPU, as they attempted to march on Westminster. Over fifty women were arrested, many were injured, and most of those arrested received prison sentences (Rosen 1974:81-2; Pankhurst 1914:81ff.; Pankhurst 1959:76; Pankhurst

1977:252-3). *The Friend* contained no mention at all of these events, but in *The British Friend* (16, 1907:73) there was a substantial editorial, reporting the WSPU action, noting that it had excited more widespread interest in the question of women's suffrage than had ever before been secured, and commenting:

> We should be very sorry that it should appear that our sympathy in this important question needed stimulating by these violent measures, for we have never understood how anyone brought up in Quaker traditions could be other than a supporter of women's suffrage; but we recognise that the heroic self-sacrifice of some of those women who have gone to prison for the cause they have so much at heart must be an increased stimulus to all who believe their cause to be just.

A number of correspondents disputed this version of 'Quaker traditions' that would inevitably lead members of the Society to supporting women's suffrage. This brought into the debate the suggestion that there was no logical connection between the Quaker assertion of spiritual equality between men and women, and equality in fitness for political life. This dispute had its roots in the 17th century theology of Quakers, where the 'spiritual equality' of men and women was deemed to arise from being in a community restored by Christ's Second Coming, no longer subject to The Fall. Thus the question of temporal equality, or of the position of women outside the community of Quakers, was not of significance to them. By the early 20th century, the theology of the Society of Friends in Britain had changed considerably, but this theological point was significantly brought to bear by Quakers who wished to argue against the Society taking a position on women's suffrage; or indeed to argue against the very idea of women gaining the Parliamentary vote at all.

The WSPU events of 1908 received no attention in the Society's journals: the march on Parliament in February, the packed Albert Hall meeting in March, the enormous demonstration in Hyde Park in June, the open-air meeting in Trafalgar Square in October, further trials and imprisonments of women, and the demand by Emmeline Pankhurst to be treated as a

political prisoner and not as a common criminal -none of these raised so much as a mention in either *The Friend* or *The British Friend* that year, nor was there any comment on other matters relating to women's suffrage. In *The Friends' Quarterly Examiner* there was a long article by Sarah Tanner (42 (1908):401-9), who wrote with an implied assumption that readers of that journal would not need to be persuaded of the abstract justice of women's claim to civic equality, because:

> If we believe in the equality of men and women in spiritual things, we can hardly deny their equality before human law, because the greater includes the less... In these days when controversy is raging... we do well to remember that the movement began with calm philosophic reasoning, and that it stands based on logic and the principles of justice and truth. (p. 401)

But her assumption of consensus was more hopeful, or perhaps tactical, than accurate.

In 1909 there was also silence concerning women's suffrage in *The Friend*, although in *The British Friend* there was some debate, though no mention was made of the hunger striking, which began in Holloway Gaol in June, nor of the forcible feeding of women prisoners, which was started in Winson Green Gaol in September. Letters printed regretted that *The British Friend* did not give more space to the question of women's suffrage (18 (1909):200); asserted that the promotion of the enfranchisement of women was in accordance with the mind of Christ (18 (1909):226); and sought to separate the justice of the question from the 'wrong tactics' of the militants (ibid). Predictably, these views drew responses from those who disagreed. A man asserted that women's suffrage was not a religious question at all, but purely a political one, and should be discussed as such. He also raised the issue of the enfranchisement of women potentially leading to women in Parliament, asking if such a revolutionary change were desirable: an attitude typical of conservatives at the time. This was related, in his eyes, to the inseparability of the actions of the militants from the cause they espoused:

> The unruly and violent conduct of these women appears unfortunately to find so large an amount of feminine support, and to be so seldom unreservedly condemned by those who strictly confine their own action within constitutional lines, that I regard these distressing occurrences as sufficiently symptomatic of a wide-spread lack of mental balance, to form a serious factor in the question. (*The British Friend* 18 (1909):260)

Sandra Holton has pointed out that the attribution of mental instability or pathology to the militants has persisted in later accounts of this period. She suggests that this arises from only reading the history backwards, from the later and more violent of the militant actions, and failing to take into account the long development of such campaigning styles whose roots in fact reach back to a much older radical tradition, drawing on Quaker experience and long-standing tactics such as tax resistance.(Holton 1994:229) The following month, a woman wrote in support of this man (*The British Friend* 18 (1909):285), suggesting that the right course of action was to appeal to the best in men, and to trust them to legislate righteously for women. From another woman, in the same issue (*the British Friend* 18 (1909):286) came the first mention of class as a factor in women's concerns: that sheltered upper-class Quaker women could not see the justice in the call for the franchise that would be obvious to them, were they working women. In these comments we see evidence of deeply conventional attitudes amongst some Friends at this time: in the first instance views typical of conservative opinion expressed directly by the correspondent; in the second, Friends' class privilege and consequent collective self-interest, pointed to by one who wishes to position herself differently.

In January 1910 the WSPU suspended militancy while the Conciliation Bill (to enfranchise women householders) went through its Parliamentary stages (Rosen op.cit:133), although constitutional campaigning did not stop; and for the first quarter of the year there was silence in the Quaker journals on all aspects of women's suffrage. In April two women wrote to *The Friend* (50 (1910):210) on the general subject of women and the law, giving the divorce laws as an example of inequality - an astute

choice, in that Quakers had publicly upheld the equality of men and women in marriage - and using this as a springboard to bring the matter of women's suffrage specifically into the sphere of Quaker concern and action:

> The great spiritual power behind the Suffrage movement is not the desire for the vote as an *asset* or a *right*, but the intense earnest longing of thousands of women for a share in the responsibility of framing the national laws, by which they, with men, are governed, and some of which at present are so hopelessly unjust to women.... Friends in the past have been in the front of many a moral fight, but there is an apathy, and even intolerance on the part of many men Friends regarding the present demands of women, which is very difficult to understand... The fact that for the most part Friends' homes are happy, and that the pressure of our one-sided laws seldom touches our own womanhood, should compel us to feel a greater responsibility towards the weak and ill-used among our less protected sisters. [original emphasis]

Here again is the suggestion that the limited social and class perspective of Friends was an inadequate guide to what was needed in society at large, together with an indication that some Friends, especially some of the women, were beginning to feel impatient that Quakers, as a body, were in the rearguard of this movement. The last sentiment expressed, concern for *other* women, was in no way unique to Quakers and had not arisen only in the suffrage campaign. Leading Liberal intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth-century used the newly coined term 'altruism', together with a language of duty and obligation to the whole of civil society. Such language was a component of the discourse about women's suffrage well before the turn of the century (Caine 1982:545; Rendall 1994).

At this point, the handling of the suffrage question became intertwined with Friends' sense of propriety about their own business procedures, and with the never-resolved question about what was a spiritual/moral concern, on which Friends may achieve a corporate voice (as they had concerning the reform of the divorce laws), and what was a political

issue, on which it would be wrong for Friends *as a body* to pronounce. Correspondence on this ranged over the recent history of Friends' involvement with other campaigns, such as the temperance movement, the abolitionist movement, and the concern to reform the divorce laws. Debate about the relationship between spirituality and politics, between a proper religious concern and a purely social one, continued over the next four years, and was the point on which the Society could not agree. As a result Quakers in Britain failed to throw their weight behind the suffrage movement, even the 'constitutional movement', as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) styled itself in contradistinction to the militancy of the WSPU . Individual Friends, however, continued to be involved, and continued with their efforts to persuade others. In October 1910, three women wrote to propose the setting up of a standing committee to draw together Friends already working, but in isolation, on women's suffrage (*The Friend* 50 (1910):712). A man responded warmly to this (*The Friend* 50 (1910):743) and also wrote to *The British Friend* (19 (1910):333) suggesting that the Society of Friends should officially include in its tenets, 'along with testimonies against war, slavery and so forth, an unqualified advocacy of the principle of equal and identical political privileges for men and women alike.'

Meanwhile, in the world outside, the Conciliation Bill had failed, and in the consequent WSPU confrontation with the police, known as 'Black Friday', women were brutally handled, assaulted and injured; but the next day - on instructions from the Home Secretary - those arrested were released without trial. No mention of any of this reached the pages of these journals.

During 1911, although the volume of correspondence on the subject of women's suffrage increased in both journals, the only novel feature was that the 'antis' became more vocal and insisted that their position, too, was a matter of conscience. Jeanne Howard, in her article on anti-suffrage women, suggests that:

> the suffragists seemed unable to recognise that the antis were capable of deep personal conviction to the anti cause based

> on careful reflection. (Howard 1982:465)

Given the place of honour that 'conscience' occupies within Quakerism it is perhaps significant that only in 1911 did the 'antis' start naming their position as also one of conscience. It may be that the perceived weight of argument about women's equality in the Society of Friends, and the desirability of extending this to society at large, had created an apparent consensus which others felt reluctant to oppose openly. The national women's and men's separate anti-suffrage leagues (led by Mrs. Humphry Ward and the Earl of Cromer respectively) had amalgamated into one organisation in December 1910; so it is possible that the higher profile of this secular organisation encouraged the Quaker 'antis' to declare themselves. The reasons given by Quakers for taking an anti-suffrage position did not differ from those of the general 'anti' population: women were already as emancipated as their constitution would bear; the turmoil of politics would degrade women; separate spheres were ordained by God; the women's vote would swamp the men's (Fawcett 1912; Harrison 1978; Howard 1982; Riley 1988; Rosen 1974). Some of the arguments used by the 'antis' more generally were notably absent from the Quaker discourse. Purely party political arguments, about supposed advantages to the Tories if women voted, or about the various class effects of enfranchising some but not all women, did not appear in the correspondence in the journals; neither did the argument that women lacked the physical force which ultimately undergirded the vote - Quakers were in any case committed to replacing physical by 'spiritual' force in public life. Also notably absent from Friends' comments was objection to women's suffrage based on the inappropriateness of women speaking in public. Brian Harrison (op.cit:58) mentions that some men's antipathy to the idea of women's suffrage stemmed from their 'disgust' at women speaking in public. Writers on this period have remarked upon the unusual position of Quaker women, in that they were accustomed to speaking in mixed gatherings, to running meetings and business affairs, and so forth (eg: Banks 1981:24; Midgley 1992:201; Ramelson 1972 81; Ryan 1992:12). A corollary, never commented upon, of this activity by the women is that Quaker *men* were therefore accustomed to hearing women speaking in mixed meetings, to seeing women conducting business

efficiently and effectively, and to living with women who took responsibility for acting on the promptings of their own conscience - such experience would presumably not leave Quaker men open to feeling the 'disgust' which Harrison notes as a feature of the wider discourse.

Other Quaker publishing activity in 1911 indicates a growing momentum, or perhaps frustration, amongst those in the Society in favour of women's suffrage. For instance, a local committee published two leaflets, *The Society of Friends and the Women's Movement* (Friends' Committee on Women's Suffrage 1911a) and *Six Reasons why the Society of Friends should support Women's Suffrage* (Friends' Committee on Women's Suffrage 1911b). The first of these starts by claiming that the Society of Friends has always recognised the spiritual equality of men and women, and concludes that therefore the Society should support the women's movement; the second puts forward essentially the same message, but in six brief points, forming a small one-sided leaflet, clearly designed to be purchased in bulk ('Price 2/-per 100') and given away. Also in 1911 there appeared a substantial (23 pages) tract written by Gulielma Crosfield (who subsequently became president of the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage) entitled *Friends and the Women's Movement* (Crosfield 1911). It is closely argued, with the author opposing all violent methods, on the grounds that if

> women have anything to give to our generation, it is because we claim a higher plane of service than of force (1911:15).

She disagrees with the argument that without militancy nothing would be done at all, and goes on to suggest that Friends have a special contribution to make based on their long history of acknowledging the equality between men and women.

As 1911 drew to a close, the Conciliation Bill finally collapsed and the WSPU's militancy turned to violence. On 21 November there was mass window breaking in Whitehall, and on 15 December Emily Wilding Davison set three pillar boxes alight. Neither of these events brought forth immediate comment in the columns of the Quaker journals.

Throughout 1912 *The British Friend* carried no correspondence at all on the issue of women's suffrage, and the debate in *The Friend* concerning women was very parochial, devoted to a discussion of what kind of 'equality' was enjoyed by women in the Society, and to the question of whether men's and women's 'natures' are inherent or determined by upbringing, education and experience. Harold Marsh wrote a series of articles drawing on membership statistics 1861-1911 and in a study of 'Woman in the Church' (*The Friend* 52 (1912):179) claimed that the proportionately unequal participation by women in the public life of the Society must be limited by inherent nature, since there were no formal barriers to women's equality. This view was countered by a female correspondent, not in membership, who wrote:

> . . . that ministry is to be reckoned by the counting of heads and the counting of syllables . . . in a Society from which we have learned to expect so much . . . one is surprised to meet . . conclusions based so entirely upon the masculine standard of values. (*The Friend* 52 (1912):252)

Another correspondent, a man, dissented from Marsh's conclusions on the basis that differences of function between men and women are to be located in upbringing and education rather than 'nature'. He adds:

> Many members of my sex have a weakness for hearing their voices in public, and this often leads them to speaking when they really have nothing much on their minds; whereas as far as my experience goes, women do not as a rule speak, in public at all events, unless they really have something which they feel bound to say. (*The Friend* 52 (1912):267)

And the following month the pervasive habit of treating the male as norm, and discussing women's differences, was challenged by Margaret Crosfield asking:

> [have] *men* Friends . . . in their dealings with and attitude towards women, really 'shaken off the effects of tradition,

custom and training' acquired in the wider world outside the church? (*The Friend* 52 (1912):299)

Amidst this leisurely debate, the WSPU's window breaking in the commercial streets of London, and the start of the arson campaign, are not commented upon; neither is the split within the Union between the Pankhursts (Emmeline and Christabel) and the Pethick-Lawrences over the issue of violence. In December the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage sent a memorial to Joseph Pease, a member of the Society and a cabinet minister, asking him to receive a delegation on the matter of women's suffrage. Pease replied, through his secretary, that his mind was made up - he was a notable 'anti' (Harrison op.cit:182) - and he would not receive a delegation (*The Friend* 52 (1912):870).

In 1913, however, Quakers finally started to use their publications to debate the issue of violence openly. In March (*The Friend* 53 (1913):158) Isabella Sharp wrote:

> Many members of our Society have been looking in vain in our periodicals for a protest from our leading Women Suffragists against the wild actions of the militant party in destroying property and endangering human life. Are we to conjecture from this silence that many of our friends are more in sympathy with the militant law-breakers than we had hoped was the case?... Many of us... who would gladly have joined ... in reasonable methods of agitation, are now so scandalised with the action of the militant party, as to be ready to forgo the desired privilege rather than appear even to countenance such action.

She was answered the next week by Sarah Bancroft Clark (and the editor noted that five other letters to the same effect were also received), who pointed out that Friends' testimony against violence was so well-established that it could surely be assumed unless otherwise stated; and if this were not the case, what hope was there for the NUWSS, which had passed resolutions and written letters condemning violence, but whose position on this was still not understood? She concluded (*The Friend* 53 (1913):177):

> The vote is not only a "desired privilege" but a great duty and responsibility. If Friends really understand and appreciate the value of their own great experiment in treating men and women as equals, do they not wish to share their experience with the State? Are we too comfortable to understand that the world is suffering from the lack of freedom which we possess?... May it not be possible that our inaction is the cause of the violence which we deplore?

The correspondence continued in this vein, some supporting one position, some the other, until in April one writer upbraided the non-militant Quaker suffragists for not being sufficiently condemnatory of the militants: he accused them of only using words like 'wild' or 'extreme' (words which imply some understanding or appreciation of the women's actions) when 'wrong' or 'wicked' (words of moral and religious condemnation) would be more appropriate (*The Friend* 53 (1913):257). Among the suffragists in the Society, however, there was a broader perception of the violence. At the annual meeting of the Friends' League it was stated that they, 'regretted violence, whether it was used by the Militants or by the Government in suppressing them' (*The Friend* 53 (1913):339). And in a 1913 pamphlet Philip Bellows wrote:

> it was the government of England that commenced the campaign of violence. Methods entirely orderly, peaceful and constitutional were met by the government with the weapons of insult, violence and illegality at the outset. (Bellows 1913:3)

He protested against the ill-treatment of suffragettes by the police, and called upon Quakers to act in this matter. It was not the forcible feeding of prisoners against which he was protesting, but rather the violent behaviour of the police, which included sexual assaults on women, (see also Kent 1987:ch.6). He was greatly pained by the lack of Quaker protest about this:

> Have we so lost the power to have strong convictions ourselves, or have we so lost the power to recognise the signs in others of real conviction that we will not protest

against the folly of denying to the citizens of this country the right to express their convictions in the appropriate quarter? ... Possibly the Quaker way of non-resistance is the better way, but the militant spirit of self-sacrifice is incomparably a more beautiful thing than our present day Quaker spirit, which seems to have lost the power to do anything but... join the mob, the Government, and the Press, in the infliction of cruel sufferings upon the most unselfish women in the land. (Bellows 1913: 17, 20)

Later that month the 1913 Yearly Meeting finally addressed the question of the women's movement, giving a large part of the Epistle to it, but still not taking a corporate position on the suffrage question:

> In almost every nation, womanhood seeks for a fuller recognition and a larger sphere of service. It has been given to few generations to witness a movement of such surpassing importance... The history of our Society brings abundant evidence of the advantage which comes to the community through a full recognition of the dignity of woman, and through according her her rightful place in family, social and church life. We as Friends, both men and women, are called to bear our share in bringing this movement to its full fruition, and in saving it from the serious dangers with which it is threatened. (*The Friend* 53 (1913):373-4)

The last sentence is significant in that it started a correspondence on 'the dangers to the women's movement', and most of the subsequent letters in *The Friend* on the question of women's suffrage appear under that heading. [4] This correspondence continued to debate, not militancy and violence *per se*, but the question of how, and how much, the non-militant suffragists would condemn it. The pattern was finally broken by a letter from Lucy Gardner (*The Friend* 53 (1913):573):

> It is very inconvenient to have our letters destroyed and to feel a sense of insecurity with regard to our property; it is distressing to read of women who are rightly and suitably punished for making war upon our material possessions, having so little sense of the justice of their punishment that

> they prefer to starve rather than submit... But what if, in some sense, they are right? What if they see more deeply into the heart of things than those of us who are content to give -not ourselves -but what we can spare easily from our normal life? What if they are the prophets and have a vision of a world redeemed by suffering and selflessness that we have not?

Predictably, this view produced immediate replies from detractors, but these in turn stimulated more pointed political responses. Just as 1911 saw the Quaker 'antis' becoming more vocal, 1913 provided the impetus for those tired of leisurely Quaker debate to make some sharper comment. Helen Mason wrote:

> ...from the very beginning of the militant campaign, each fresh development has been brought about by the action or words of men in Parliament or in power in some other way. In the old days, when the women gave their energies solely to propaganda work and to interrupting meetings, they were taunted by Lord Haldane with using a policy of pinpricks, and asked why they did not do something serious. ... How many times have [the women] been brutally treated on peaceful demonstrations?... Personally I think that impatience in the delay of justice and in the exercise of tyranny is divine impatience. (*The Friend* 53 (1913):676)

This slant on the debate also served to bring out more specific, detailed and direct criticism of the militants. In an article (*The Friend* 53 (1913):705-6) Janet Payne (organising secretary of the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage) criticised the militant suffragette movement for being autocratic, its members having to obey orders, whereas, 'the Women's Movement proper is essentially democratic.' In the same issue Joseph Clark wrote (*The Friend* 53 (1913):713) to condemn the militants as too cowardly to work in the open, rather seeking 'the darkness of night for their misdeeds' and persuading 'young men and women... often for money, to commit these crimes.' His language, evoking the image of militancy as a moral evil, echoes views widespread at the time; and the slur on the WSPU, that it was paying people to commit crimes, had been

voiced in Parliament by the Home Secretary in June 1913 (Pankhurst 1914:360). Over the next few months a series of letters also revealed that some Quaker women were active members of the WSPU, leading to the comment that, 'it is strange that Friends would pay subscriptions to support violence' (*The Friend* 54 (1914):745); and in *The British Friend* (22 (1913):300), an unsigned (presumably editorial) article drew attention to the *religious* dimension of the women's suffrage movement, as being the aspect which alone could oppose the 'deplorable course of action of a section of the Suffragists.' However, 'these misguided and criminal acts' and 'evil misdirection of energy' are explained as being provoked by a 'profound sense of wrong and injustice to women' , echoes again of an attitude of understanding the roots of these actions, rather than resorting to unqualified moral condemnation.

After some considerable lapse of time (since Yearly Meeting the previous May) the matter of Friends' attitude to the women's movement was raised at Meeting for Sufferings (the executive committee of the Yearly Meeting) in February 1914. Some wanted the subject excluded altogether, on the now familiar grounds that it was political, but the Meeting agreed to appoint a committee to draw up a statement of:

> what the experiences of Friends had been, and the advantages that had accrued to the Society from the frank recognition of the equality of men and women. (*The Friend* 54 (1914):107)

For a considerable period after this there was continuing correspondence, some of it wholly embroiled in detailed argument about the proper conduct of Quaker business in relation to this subject, but aspects of it are of wider interest. A man, who had been present at the meeting in question, wrote at length, pointing out *inter alia* that the women present would not allow the phrase 'undesirable leadership' (of the militant movement) to appear in the minute (*The Friend* 55 (1914):115), and added:

> I understand that members of our Society support the propaganda of the Suffragettes by purse and person. They march in their processions; they attend their meetings; they

> do not deny having sent them money. One lady Friend, a most charming young married woman, assured me that she had not the courage to break windows herself, but honoured and envied those who did.... It is evident to me that the Pankhursts and not Millicent Fawcett are the true and trusted leaders of the movement to which the Society of Friends has now... been in a way committed... The example of their leaders, though fortunately not imitated to the full, has, if I may say so, measurably tinctured the behaviour of their followers... I doubt if the Woman's Question will regain a fair hearing until all symptoms of the feverish and lawless methods prevalent today have died down, and respectable women have ceased to palliate crime, whilst professing to deprecate it.

This is the only occasion on which the Pankhursts are named in any of the Quaker publications. But could it be true that *Quaker* women would engage in violence? Over the next few weeks, several male correspondents argued over this, but no-one mentioned a small story in the national daily press, which no Quaker publication ever reported:

> May Gibbs... a Quakeress... living at Lincoln's Inn House [the WSPU headquarters]... was charged... with assaulting [a] Constable by striking him with a dog whip... outside Holloway Gaol on the arrival of Mrs. Pankhurst... The defendant admitted that she had struck two constables... (*Morning Post* 12 March 1914)

So here was indeed one Quaker woman prepared to countenance violence, and not lacking the courage to enact it. There is interest in the detail of this story. A dog-whip was not a fashion accessory, and would normally have been carried only if a dog-cart were being driven.[5] Since the report makes no mention of a dog-cart we must consider that May Gibbs had gone to this demonstration of support for Mrs Pankhurst purposely armed with a dog-whip. In view of the record of police violence against women suffrage campaigners this may have been prudent self-defence, though out of keeping with Quaker views on peaceful behaviour.

Early in 1914, Mariabella Fry, a frequent contributor expressing opposition to the women's suffrage cause, wrote to deplore the blunting of the moral sense which she perceived in Quaker women who, a few years ago, would have been shocked at the idea of sympathy with any crime, but who now spoke leniently of the militants, if not absolutely condoning them. She went on to attack the notion that women were equal in the Society of Friends, arguing that this had never, in fact, been the case (*The Friend* 54 (1914):147). Subsequent correspondence and reports of speeches show an interesting polarisation, no doubt in part tactical as well as springing from sincere belief: those who supported women's suffrage based their argument on the unique equality of women within the Society of Friends, and their desire to see this equality extended to society at large; those who were opposed to women's suffrage denied that women were, ever had been, or should be equal in the Society. Shortly after this, a correspondent (*The Friend* 54 (1914):206) asserted that there was a Friend suspected of arson, and deplored hearing militancy condemned purely on tactical, rather than moral, grounds. In the same issue (*The Friend* 54 (1914):207) a Quaker militant finally declared herself: Ethel Impey wrote to explain her position, that constitutional methods had been exhausted and she, like other militants, now felt compelled by conscience to act. She upbraided Friends for not protesting against the forcible feeding of women prisoners, claiming that if it were happening to common prostitutes, Friends would be protesting loudly. A week later (*The Friend* 54 (1914):222) a slightly shocked man responded:

> One is already too sadly aware of the increasing spirit of violence and lawlessness, which is characteristic of the present time, but one was not prepared to have it openly defended by a woman "Friend" in your last week's issue... How is it possible to reconcile [the advices to Friends] with the acts of militancy, which are being conducted almost daily -to the injury and loss of many innocent people?... If our Society owes a duty at all at the present juncture, rather than raise "its united voice" against the sufferings of women now in prison for their own acts, and who have the remedy for forcible feeding in their own hands, should it not record its solemn protest against their commission of such crimes, and

express its sympathy with the innocent victims?

The correspondence continued until the Yearly Meeting in May, when a statement on 'The Position of Women' was finally agreed, which still did not adopt a stance on the enfranchisement of women. The lengthy statement started by quoting in full the relevant section of the 1913 Yearly Meeting Epistle and continued:

> The founders of our Society perceived that spiritual privileges and responsibilities should be open to all alike, without distinction of rank or sex. . . The conviction of the equal spiritual worth of man and woman finds expression in our marriage ceremony, where in identical terms they take one another for wife and husband. . . This equality did not at first find full expression in the business meetings of the Society . . . [The] opening up to women of a position of spiritual equality with men was an outcome of Christian principles as our founders understood them . . . In issuing this statement of the experience of our Society we do not enter into the question of women's political enfranchisement. . . The Society of Friends believes it wise to leave political action on subjects of this kind to the judgment and conscience of individuals. ('Position of Women', *Minutes and proceedings of London Yearly Meeting of Friends* 1914, Minute 104: 185-188)

The conclusion of this minute, that the suffrage question was a matter of individual conscience, demonstrates that the Yearly Meeting as a corporate body had failed to accept the arguments of the suffrage campaigners about the effects of *structural* inequality.

After this the energy seemed to drain out of the issue, and in September Hannah Bellows (Hon. Secretary of the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage) wrote on behalf of the League to say that, in common with other suffrage societies, it was putting its people and resources at the disposal of the needs of the war situation (*The Friend* 54 (1914):678); in the case of Friends this meant, of course, relief work.

The story of the militant campaign of the WSPU is but a small part of the story of the fight for women's suffrage, which itself is only one of the changes sought by the nineteenth century women's movement. Some historians regret the disproportionate, and distorting, attention paid to the WSPU (Hirshfield 1990; Holton 1986) but it is a revealing period in relation to British Quaker history. It provides evidence which exposes as myth the idea that Quakers, corporately, have always and reliably been a significant force for social reform. Indeed, this very question became a focus of Quaker attention at the time when correspondence turned to the comparisons between the suffrage cause and Friends' engagement with the causes of temperance and abolition. In a small editorial comment Edward Grubb, editor of *The British Friend* from 1893, wrote:

> we ask our readers to consider whether, just as Friends recognise now that they ought never to have been divided about Slavery so it may be with Women's Suffrage. (*The British Friend* 20 (1911):49)

An interesting project for another occasion would be to trace the process whereby British Quakers, who were in fact divided on all the great social reforms of the nineteenth century, have come to be widely perceived as having being organisationally in the forefront of change.

Although individual Quakers, men as well as women, contributed to the suffrage campaign -in both its constitutional and, as I have shown, militant forms -the Society of Friends as an organisation prevaricated to the end. In 1913 the Friends' League for Women's Suffrage had 15 branches and some 800 members (*Free Church Suffrage Times*, November 1913). This is out of a British membership of London Yearly Meeting of 19000, or 27000 if associates and attenders are taken into account (*Minutes and Proceedings of London Yearly Meeting of Friends* 1913:38). This cannot be interpreted as a groundswell of supportive opinion, and in accounts of Friends' *activities* in support of women's suffrage, there is frequent recurrence of the names of a relatively small number of women from well-connected families. It is the work of these prominent women, and the contemporary and subsequent accounts of

their commitment, which have created the impression that 'the Quakers' were active in support of the cause.

Why did the Society as a whole, or even in substantial part, not move more strongly on this issue? I suggest that this was in part due to the substantial conservative element in the Society, the wealthy, upper middle-class Quakers who perceived their interests to be in preserving the status quo; in part due to parochialism and a narrow vision which directed energy inwards to matters of interest only to members of the Society; and in part to the particular Quaker method of reaching corporate decisions, which was inherently slow and cautious, and tended to dampen down untoward enthusiasm. This period saw the majority Quakers following the great sea changes of mood and opinion in the surrounding society, as evidenced in the matter of the Women's Yearly Meeting referred to earlier, rather than leading them.

In 1918, when the franchise was at last extended to certain groups of women over the age of thirty, the only published notice of this among Quakers was a letter in *The Friend* (58 (1918):99) from Gulielma Crosfield. When the franchise was finally extended to women on the same basis as men, in 1928, the matter was not noted at all in the journal. The pervasive myth that women were equal in the Society of Friends seems to have led to a persistent complacency in which Quakers, renowned for being progressive about gender matters, were divided along broadly the same lines as the surrounding society and, as a corporate body, followed its changing norms rather slowly.

Notes

[1] For their assistance with the research for this paper I thank: Jean Strachan, assistant editor of *The Friend* at the time the initial research was undertaken; Christina Lawson, librarian of Woodbrooke College at the time; the staff of the Library of the Society of Friends. I also thank Maria Luddy for her helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

[2] One Cadbury apparently involved, and there may have been others, was Dorothy Howitt Cadbury (1872-1950). (Library of the Society of Friends, *Dictionary of Quaker Biography*, typescript)

[3] There is a difficulty in using 'The Society of Friends' when only Friends in Britain are being spoken about. It would be cumbersome to insert 'in Britain' on every occasion, and in failing to do so I am following usage at the time I am studying. I hope this compromise and footnote are acceptable to members of the Society elsewhere than Britain.
[4] There is one notable exception (*The Friend* 53 (1913):528) -a letter from Madeline Grubb appears under the rubric 'Dangers of the Women's Movement'; presumably a 'Freudian slip', as 'to' is reinstated the following week!
[5] I am grateful to the curators of the City of Bath Museum of Costume and the Costume Department of the City of Birmingham Art Gallery and Museum for their advice on this.

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