



The Ascent of Woman

Melanie Phillips

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The story of the fight to gain the vote for women is about much more than a peripheral if picturesque skirmish around the introduction of universal suffrage. It is an explosive story of social and sexual revolutionary upheaval, and one which has not yet ended. The movement for women's suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prefigured to a startling extent the controversies which rage today around the role of women. Far from the stereotype of a uniform body of women chaining themselves to railings, the early feminist movement was riven by virulent arguments over women's role in society, the balance to be struck between self-fulfilment and their duties to family and children, and their relationship with men.

Melanie Phillips' brilliant book tells the story of the fight for women's suffrage in a way which sets the high drama of those events in the context of the moral and intellectual ferment that characterised it.

The Ascent of Woman Details

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From Reader Review The Ascent of Woman for online ebook

Jan says

One point for puntastic title.

One point for tone of entire first chapter essentially cut and pasted from Mary Wollstonecraft.

Half a point for lucid, well-ordered narration of suffrage movement.

Half a point for making me so angry I wanted to throw it out of the window (any book that actually has opinions this rousing deserves half a point).

I appear to have given three stars to a book I totally despised the tone of. ho hum.

Rowena says

I learned a lot from this book. The struggles that the female suffragettes went through were formidable, and it's quite reminiscent of the current global climate where women are still fighting for their rights. Truly, I wonder why so many people are complacent about voting when it wasn't so long ago that women and blacks weren't even allowed to vote.

With that being said, I was quite surprised by the number of women who displayed misogynistic tendencies themselves. I was also appalled by the anti-woman sentiments at that time. Rousseau (1762) shocked me with this line: "The woman is made specially to please the man." A lot of people actually believed that learning in a woman was "unpleasing and unnecessary." I would have laughed if it hadn't been so tragic.

I did like the core message of the book which was "the only way to emancipate women was to end female dependency."

Furqan says

A comprehensive and impartial (not something I would've expected from the darling of Daily Mail Fail) historical account of British suffrage movement. Can't say much about it's readability as it often reads like a dry history textbook, but solid information + analysis is there for someone interested in the period.

Susu says

A summary of the development of the suffragettes movement from the first debates to the female vote - it helps to have some working knowledge on British politics. Interesting, encompassing, informative.

Alexandra says

It's rare that I read a book that actually makes me angry. Like, exclaim-out-loud angry.

It's very rare that this happens with a history book.

This book had that impact on me.

The book bills itself as "A history of the suffragette movement and the ideas behind it," which sounded perfect for me - I was convinced there was a rich 19th century tradition of ideas and activity in Britain for the women's suffrage movement to spring out of so, naturally, I was dead keen to read about it. And, truly, the first few chapters do do that. Phillips goes right back to the very awesome Mary Wollstonecraft and her writing around the French Revolution, like *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (suck it, Edmund Burke, you got ripped). She discusses women's involvement in the campaigns against 'vice' and other social reforms, and all of that was quite interesting. Middle class, but perhaps that's where the information is mostly to be found? And, yeh, a lot of this sort of campaigning required free time, which women in the working classes did not have because they were, you know, working. So I could move past that (a bit).

Anyway, well and good. Then she got up to the 20th century and the really focussed suffrage stuff, and then... well, there were gasps and strangled cries and the savage use of pencil to underline unbelievable passages. There may have been mutterings not entirely under the breath. It's fair to say that my husband expressed concern a few times.

Now, I had just read a biography of Emmeline Pankhurst, so that didn't help matters, because Phillip is really, really anti-Pankhursts - both Emmeline and Christabel (Sylvia seems to get a pass). She makes wild claims about them and provides quite vicious descriptions such that - I'm sorry - I had to go back and check that this was written by a woman. I can't believe this was written by a woman. They are described as having "pathological self-importance and [the] urge to martyrdom" (p236); Christabel had "histrionics" and was "the queen of melodrama" (p240); their relationship is described as "unhealthily close and introverted" (p254). I just... what? Seriously? In a book that would quite like to be passing itself off as a readable but serious history?

And this is where another of my frustrations came in. Phillips does use a number of primary sources, and has some extensive quotes from them, which is awesome. Tick! However - and this is a really huge problem for me - there is little consideration of the perspective being brought by those sources, and whether they might be problematic. Peeps, this is the sort of thing I teach my students at high school to consider. Consider: Phillips quotes from Teresa Billington-Greig, whose book Phillips herself describes as "coruscating and merciless" (p246). Phillips draws on this book until p250, but nowhere at all does she consider whether Billington-Greig might be bitter after splitting from the WSPU (run by the Pankhursts), or that it might have been intended to discredit the WSPU in favour of the Women's Freedom League, which she founded after the split. This is poor, poor historical work. I don't care that she is apparently "wearing her scholarship lightly," as a review from the Irish Sunday Independent described it; that's shoddy scholarship.

And then... ah, then. The conclusion. One of the things she'd pointed out throughout the book is the double standard that women were both too inferior to vote, because they're women, but also too good and pure to be sullied by politics. Nasty. Anyway, in the Epilogue she says this:

The same double standard persists to this day, with women claiming 'equality' and yet insisting, for example, that mothers have prior claim over fathers to their children after divorce; or that women must be economically independent of their husbands, unless they separate, in which case men must turn back into breadwinners; or that if a man is violent to a woman or child, he is an irredeemable savage, but if a woman is

violent towards a man or a child, she must be suffering from an emotional problem. (p316)

It's fair to say that I still have trouble believing that paragraph.

So. Yeh. I learnt a few things about the context of the suffrage movement, so that's good. I was also reminded just how important it is to demand a consideration of why something was written in the first place.

Beth (bibliobeth) says

The reason I enjoy reading non-fiction primarily is to learn about new things or periods in our history that interest me. So when this book was picked by one of the GoodReads groups that I participate with, I was excited to get to it. Obviously I am aware of the Suffragette movement and their fight for women's rights to give us the vote that we all take for granted nowadays in Western countries, but I hoped I would learn a little more about the famous names like Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst and what they stood for. Unfortunately, I have somewhat mixed opinions over what I read. Some parts made me feel quite furious with their anti-female statements – for example, a quote by Rousseau in 1762 where he states: "The woman is made specially to please the man." Lovely, right? However, what riled me the most is when other women would also back up these kind of beliefs, for example, one Anna Barbauld who believed the best way to acquire knowledge for a woman was to have a conversation with their brother or father and to undergo a course of reading that these male relatives may recommend. What makes this comment even more shocking is that this woman was an essayist, a critic, a poet and a children's author, so you could say quite a learned woman and it completely baffles me to think that such an obviously intelligent woman would make it harder to get respect for her own sex.

The author takes us back to one of the early feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft and her landmark text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to the development of the Blue Stockings literary discussion groups and building up to the height of the suffragette movement where she focused mainly on the Pankhursts – Emmeline and Christabel. I found some parts of this slightly dry and a bit hard to swallow, especially when some of the intricate details were fairly sketchy. The campaigners themselves seemed to have split into two different factions, those that went about their protests quite peacefully and the "militants," die-hard suffragettes that would endure imprisonment, hunger strike and forced feeding, throw themselves under horses or chain themselves to buildings and would think nothing of using a spot of violence or threat to make their voices heard. However, I don't think I'm alone in wondering if the author had some sort of issue with the Pankhursts as there did not seem to be one good thing she could say about the mother-daughter team. Don't get me wrong, I don't condone violence/threats in any way, shape or form but it just seemed at times the author was trying too hard to paint the Pankhursts as the "bad guys."

There were parts of this book though that did draw a smile in regards to some of the beliefs that were held and propagated at the time. For example, women will ensure the racial superiority of the human race, 75-80% of men were infected with gonorrhoea and 20% with syphilis before the age of thirty therefore men are the source of all disease, and this particular quote which raised my eyebrows right off the top of my head:

"The human race is suffering from over-fertilisation and enforced reproduction. Man the destroyer has been at work, not woman the constructor. When man is continent the mysterious origin of cancer will be solved and cancer, with other kindred horror, will disappear. Sexual germs are not confined to the reproductive organs; they permeate the whole body. Assimilation and absorption by the female organism cannot divest them of their potential properties of stimulation and disintegration, of decay and corruption. Hence the

terrible increase of cancer among the western races, who for so long have ignored the law.”

Frances Swiney – prominent suffrage speaker

Indeed, the most influential medical authority at that time, one Sir William Acton was very concerned about the waste of spermatic fluid which came with sexual excess for men and noted that many un-married men were also intellectuals. Sorry – what?

To sum up, as a reading experience I do have many mixed emotions about this book. I felt like I learned a few things (some of which I wish I could UN-learn now!) but my beliefs were a bit shaken at times although I will probably do a bit more reading around this subject as it is very interesting to get a balanced view on a movement that was vitally important towards equality for women. No, things still aren't perfect, especially in some countries where women are still fighting to be recognised as an equal to man, but I think without the suffragette protests in our past, life would look a bit different today, and not for the better.

Please see my full review at <http://www.bibliobeth.com>

Julian Leatherdale says

This book sets the history of the suffragette movement in Britain within a context of intellectual and political thought about male-female power relations (notably sexuality, disease, prostitution and divorce) dating back to Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. While it proved a useful overview as an introduction to the topic (quoting generously from sources such as memoirs, tracts and newspapers of the day) the book soon revealed an uncritical, almost pathological, prejudice against the Pankhursts (particularly Emmeline and Christobel).

The author quotes critical views of the Pankhursts from memoirs by women who split from the WSPU on ideological grounds (such as Theresa Billington-Grieg) without considering the partiality of these views. Phillips has a thesis that first wave feminism made the tactical error of claiming equality for women with men at the same time as superiority to men. This special pleading of women as morally superior and the potential saviours of (1) the human race (2) the British/white race and/or (3) the Empire played into Conservative views of women as naturally different and therefore belonging to another sphere (associated with feelings, care, compassion etc). She claims this still bedevils feminism today!

She also argues that the WSPU's militancy (a cynical ploy to recruit more members to the movement and boost the Pankhurst's martyrdom) was effective at first but quickly became an impediment to parliamentary support. This case is not made convincingly. The Tories, Labour and the Liberals all feared that woman's suffrage would boost the voting base of their political opponents and repeated attempts at suffrage bills were narrowly defeated in the Commons.

Phillips then criticises the Pankhurst's support of the government in WWI as an ideological volte-face although she argues that this support and the public role of women in many jobs during wartime convinced the parliament of women's fitness to vote.

Ali says

A wonderfully informative and detailed book. I learned such a lot. Only slight criticism is that sometimes the author presented her opinion as fact. A minor bugbear in an otherwise brilliant work.

Tracey says

a truly fascinating read. The strength and convictions of the right to vote for women and the explanations in the book are so inspiring and I am so thankful for what they did.

the strong women that are mentioned are alive on these pages as you feel the determination they would have had as they tried to live the lives the wanted.
