Dame Ethel Smyth: the Suffragette years, in her own words

Front cover of Ethel Smyth, ‘A Final Burning of Boats Etc.’ (1928), showing Ethel and her dog Pan III.

Ethel Smyth published ten books between 1919 and 1940, mainly autobiographical in content. Two of these, ‘A Final Burning of Boats Etc.’ and ‘Female Pipings in Eden’, reveal her suffrage journey. Rather than relate a secondary narrative we feel there is no one more able to tell the story about her time as a suffragette than Ethel herself, in her own words.

Ethel Smyth expert Lewis Orchard has extracted passages from ‘A Final Burning of Boats Etc.’ (FBOB) and ‘Female Pipings in Eden’ (FPIE), with connecting explanatory remarks in italics.

“It was in the year 1910 that Mrs Pankhurst came into my life, changing, as contact with her was apt to do, its whole tenor. (FPIE, p.190)

I went to a meeting at Lady Brassey’s to hear Mrs Pankhurst and be introduced to her. A graceful woman rather under middle height; one would have said a delicate-looking woman, but the well-knit figure, the quick, deft movements, the clear
complexion, the soft bright eyes that on occasion could emit lambent flame, betokened excellent health. She knew I was an artist of sorts and connected with no Suffrage society, hence my reception was, if anything, chilly. But a very short time afterwards, at the fiery inception of what was to become the deepest and closest of friendships.....” (FPIE, p.191)

*After meeting Emmeline Pankhurst and, like many, falling under her spell, Ethel decided to devote two years of her life to active participation with the militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) movement, temporarily suspending her career as a composer.*

“Before a fortnight had passed it became evident to me that to keep out of the movement, to withhold any modicum it was possible to contribute to that cause, was as unthinkable as to drive art and politics in double harness. At the moment I was deep in certain musical undertakings. These liquidated, I decided that two years should be given to the W.S.P.U. after which, reversing engines, I would go back to my job.” (FPIE, p.192)

“The routine of her life (Mrs. Pankhurst’s) was that meetings were arranged by the fabulously competent W.S.P.U. staff – and on some of these occasions it was my privilege to accompany her, and note how the fiercest opposition would melt away before she had been five minutes on the platform. She used little gesture beyond the rare outstretching of both hands so wonderfully caught in her statue on the Victoria Embankment ......I never heard her make a mediocre speech, let alone one that failed to hit the centre of the target, and the whole was bathed in that indescribable, uncapturable element, the genius of an orator.” (FPIE, p.194-5)

“Mrs. Pankhurst, who maintained, and with truth, that she was law abiding by nature, lit a fire in the souls of English women that will never be extinguished.” (FPIE, p.189)

“In those early days of my association with the W.S.P.U. occurred an event.......namely the formal introduction to the Suffragettes of ‘The March of the Women’.....A Suffragette choir had been sternly drilled.....We had the organ, and I think a cornet to blast forth the tune (system to be recommended on such occasions) and it was wonderful processing up the centre aisle of the Albert Hall in Mus. Doc, robes at Mrs. Pankhurst’s side, and being presented with a beautiful baton, encircled by a golden collar with the date, 23rd March 1911.” (FPIE, p.201)
In the Autumn of 1911 I realised for the first time what ‘Votes for Women’ meant, and it seemed to me that all self-respecting women, especially such as occupied any place, be it ever so humble, in the public eye, were called upon to take action. Nothing is less compatible with musical creation than politics of any kind and the peculiarly devastating effect of a struggle such as the militants were engaged in – and this was the party, of course, to which I allied myself- needs no stressing. There was only one thing to be done; it would spell ruin to the painfully sown little musical crop, but other women were giving life itself.... I determined to devote two years of my life to the Cause, and afterwards return to my own job; which programme was carried out to the letter.” (FBOB, p.31)

“Almost immediately afterwards (the concert of her works conducted by her in 1911) I got swept into the hottest heart of the fight for the Vote. Politics, even of a milder brand than the militants adopted, are incompatible with art, so I determined to give myself wholly to militancy for two years and then go back to my own job – a plan carried out to a day. When those two years were over, in order to be out of temptation I went to Egypt, wrote The Bosun, travelled back in 1914 via Vienna....and came back with two contracts in my pocket: The Wreckers for Munich and the premiere of The Bosun for Frankfurt a/M.” (FPIE, p.41-43). Both performances were scheduled for 1915 but were cancelled when war was declared.

“One bore in mind a dictum of Mrs. Pankhurst’s to the effect that, if any Government were willing to give the vote only to women with red hair whose name was Eliza, the offer should be jumped at.
.... escape to the Continent in order that Mrs. Pankhurst may consult with Christabel, who had crossed to Paris after her last imprisonment, taking with her the deeds and securities of the W.S.P.U., and other documents the Government hoped to find when shortly afterwards they raided the office. From that time onward the movement was directed from Christabel’s flat in the Avenue de la Grande Armée, and messengers – such, of course, as were not under sentence – passed openly to and fro between London and Paris. It was Christabel who evolved and worked out every detail of the strategy, her mother being like all the rest a willing executant.” (FPIE, p.201)

In ‘Female Pipings in Eden’ Ethel Smyth quoted heavily from letters written to her by Emmeline Pankhurst, without her consent and in March 1934, in an act of hindsight, she adds this acknowledgement to the edition.

“The infamous ‘Cat and Mouse’ Act had not yet issued from the brain of Mr. McKenna (1912), but hunger striking was becoming rather the rule than the exception..... It was three years since gentle Marion Wallace-Dunlop, the first hunger- striker, had shown the way; two years since Lady Constance Lytton (an old friend of Ethel) as ‘Jane Warton, Seamstress’, and two others had been forcibly fed.” (FPIE, p.203-4)

“...after thoroughly overhauling his prisoner, the prison doctor declared that Lady Constance Lytton’s heart was far too weak to allow forcible feeding. Whereupon she was released – of course without signing any sort of undertaking to abstain from militancy. About a fortnight later, strange to say, this very same heart, as tested in the body of one ‘Jane Warton’, an obscure militant of the working class, was pronounced to be perfectly sound; so ‘Jane Warton’ was forcibly fed. And when Constance Lytton had more or less recovered from this hideous experience – curtailed probably by the inevitable leaking out of ‘Jane Warton’s’ identity – in her very first public speech she called attention to the many obscure suffragettes tortured and broken by forcible feeding as she was, from whom an indifferent world would withhold even such grudging recognition of their heroism as is bestowed on the high-born lady in disguise.
In my mind I have often compared Gandhi and Mr Lansbury. The latter was by way of being a great champion of woman’s suffrage, and was, I fancy, as sincere about it as any politician can be about anything. Anyhow he advocated militancy, went to prison, refused to sign a promise to mend his ways and faced the hunger strike. But whereas Gandhi stuck it till he gained his point, after a day or two Mr. Lansbury gave the required undertaking and was set free; the moral of which is that whereas the Vote affected women only, half the Untouchables are of Gandhi’s own sex.” (FBOB, 163)

Ethel does not record whether or not she went on hunger strike during her period in Holloway prison.

“As for the early Christians, ablaze with such a fire of love that, according to one of them, the flames that licked his charred body seemed to him heavenly caresses, does the courage of these equal that of Mrs. Pankhurst, Lady Constance Lytton, and dozens of less known women, who willed to be tortured – and remember the war was not then in sight – because this was the only road to freedom for women? ‘If men will not do us justice’ cried Mrs. Pankhurst in a magnificent epigram, ‘they shall do us violence!’ I do not care whether my readers bless or curse, admire or execrate the hunger strikers. My point is that they pushed selflessness, endurance, passionate pity and love, in short idealism in its most transcendental form, to a pitch which will be the wonder of the human race as long as this globe spins round the sun. And I maintain that the elements of which their action was compounded are eternally needed and eternally rare. (FBOB, p.9)

“...a paper by Dr. Mary Gordon, Inspector of Prisons treating of the genesis of militancy, and in it occur the following words: ‘it was a spiritual movement, a thing of fire; not premeditated, not controllable, but which happened at the bidding of the unconscious, and when its work was done, died down and out, leaving behind it a re-birth and a new situation’ I think this is one of the most accurate and exquisite definitions I have ever come across.” (FBOB, p.164)

“Man after man, who, when nothing but winning women’s support at elections was in question, had glibly voiced our claims, would cast his promises to the winds when the hour struck for effective action; displaying the same stupidity, treachery, obstinacy, conceit and hypocrisy that had begotten, and was now feeding militancy. ‘Sex war indeed’, cries Constance Lytton ‘is not this sex war? It is sex peace that we want!’” (FBOB, p.165)

“And Lord Esher, who for party reasons refuses his name – not, mark you, to the militants but to the Conservative Women’s League – but promises his prayers which, he assures them, are far more valuable! One cannot help feeling grateful to his lordship for enshrining in that inimitable phrase the unblushing hypocrisy of our champions!” (FBOB, p.166)

“As for the Liberal Cabinet, ten of whom were pledged to our cause, it is amusing to note that both the wise Mrs. Fawcett and the politically-bred Lady Selbourne were more or less taken in by Mr. Asquith’s assurances, given at a certain interview after that crowning act of treachery, the Adult Suffrage Bill, had been announced. Lady
Selbourne considered the implacable Pankhursts had lost their heads when, instead of accepting the Asquith-Judas embrace, they proclaimed the whole thing was a trap. But, as usual, they were right; the Conciliation Bill was deftly ‘torpedoed’ and the work of years brought to naught.” (FBOB, p.166)

“I knew that my age-old affection and respect for Mrs. Fawcett was always a thorn in Mrs. Pankhurst’s side.” (FPIE, p.208)

“It was, I think, in connection with this monstrous piece of trickery – for Mr. Asquith had not ceased to promise that in this Parliament the women were going to have a square deal – that a great window-breaking raid was planned. It was timed so as to lodge some 150 of us in Holloway simultaneously, which we knew would put the Government to considerable expense and inconvenience.” (FPIE, p.208)

“One of the most enchanting, certainly the most comic of my magic lantern slides, shows Mrs. Pankhurst training herself to break a window. As dusk came on we repaired to a secluded part of Hook Heath...that lies in front of my house. And near the largest fir tree we could find I dumped down a collection of nice round stones.... I imagine Mrs. Pankhurst had not played ball games in her youth, and the first stone flew backwards out of her hand, narrowly missing my dog. Once more we began at a distance of about three yards, the face of the pupil assuming with each failure – and there were a good many – a more and more ferocious expression. And when at last a thud proclaimed success, a smile of such beatitude.....stole across her countenance, that much to her mystification and rather to her annoyance, the instructor collapsed on a clump of heather helpless with laughter. (Mrs. Pankhurst’s sense of humour was always rather uncertain).” (FPIE, p.208).

“Alas! the lesson availed nothing! The Downing Street window selected by Mrs. Pankhurst was duly bombarded – I think she had two shots at it before they arrested her – but the stones never got anywhere near the objective. I broke my window successfully and was bailed out of Vine Street at midnight by wonderful Mr. Pethick-Lawrence, who was ever ready to take root in any Police Station, his money bag between his feet, at any hour of the day or night.” (FPIE, p.209)

“The subsequent trial I thoroughly enjoyed and rather fell in love with our judge, Sir Rufus Isaacs, in whose eye I detected a gleam of amused sympathy..... The ensuing two months in Holloway, though one never got accustomed to an unpleasant sensation when the iron door was slammed and the key turned, were as nothing to me because Mrs. Pankhurst was with us.” (FPIE, p.209)

“The athletic sports in the prison yard, inspired and organised by the younger prisoners to the delight of Mrs. Pankhurst, were capital fun. How we got the materials – calico, purple, white, and green tissue paper and so on, not to speak of hammer and nails – I cannot remember, but designs and mottoes breathing insult and defiance would embellish the courtyard walls for hours before they were torn down. Evidently some of the wardresses were afflicted with blindness – also on occasion with deafness.” (FPIE, p.210)
“...the so-called Cat and Mouse Act of which the murderous, cowardly, pseudo-humane refinement is to my mind more revolting than any torture invented in the Middle Ages, was now in full swing. The authorities dared not let the women die, so would release them, sometimes half-dead, to be re-arrested as soon they were judged fit to serve the remainder of their sentence. Whereupon the whole hideous business would begin again, the idea being that by degrees bodies and wills would be broken past mending. How a group of civilised Christian men could lend themselves to this proceeding rather than perform a simple act of justice already fifty years overdue is inconceivable”. (FPIE, p.212)

“In April (1913) Mrs. Pankhurst was once more arrested, and embarked on a hunger-and thirst strike....two bescrabbled little cards dated April 9, 1913, written on the ninth day of this ordeal which she believed she would not survive. The matron had mercifully put her in the charge of a wardress she was much attached to, and to her these farewell lines were secretly confided, to be posted to me in case of her death. When hunger-striking she always refused with such terrible violence...to be forcibly fed, that no doctor could be found to attempt it.” (FPIE, p.212)

“It was settled that as soon as she was well enough she and Miss Pine (her nurse) were to come to me...she contrived as usual to slip away under the noses of the enemy, dash up a side street and into a car in which sat Lady Pine. They arrive safely at my house (‘Coign’ in Hook Heath, Woking). Very soon detectives put in an appearance and post themselves round about my half-acre. Next day it is pouring with rain. Opposite the garden wicket is a huge gorse bush beneath which two plain-clothes men have hollowed out a sort of cave where they sit in prickly dryness.” (FPIE, p.214)

Ethel Smyth is seen sitting shielding a weary Emmeline Pankhurst with an umbrella at the garden gate of her cottage in Woking, prior to her re-arrest with Nurse Pine and Dr Murray in attendance, 26 May 1913.
(Courtesy of The Museum of London, Ref.5256)

“I have often reflected that during those two months in Holloway for the first and last time in my life I was in good society. Think of it! more than a hundred women parked together, old and young, rich and poor, strong and delicate, one and all divorced from any thought of self, careless as to
consequences, forgetful of everything save the idea for which they had faced imprisonment.” (FPIE, p.211)

Although Ethel took no further part in active militancy after the end of her two years with the WSPU in 1913, she remained a powerful advocate for women’s rights as a suffragist thereafter, supporting Emmeline Pankhurst and creating a large volume of material both in her books and in her voluminous correspondence both with individuals and in publications.

“In the summer of 1913 my two years’ active connection with the W.S.P.U. came to its appointed end, and though Christabel, very rightly from her point of view, looked upon all women primarily as cannon-fodder, Mrs. Pankhurst was thankful I was about to make an effort to pick up the broken thread of my music life.” (FPIE, p.215)

Selected and extracted by Lewis Orchard, Smyth Archive Volunteer, Surrey History Centre, for The March of the Women project.