Ethel Smyth, 'A Fresh Start', draft memoir of only three chapters, c.1941-1944.

The draft of the first three chapters of a further memoir, which remained unfinished at her death in 1944, covers the period 1908 to 1914. It commences with Ethel's reflections on the aftermath of Henry Brewster's death in 1908 and a passage on her stay in Venice arranged immediately afterwards by her sister Mary who had friends who owned a palazzo on the Grand Canal in which they stayed. There follows a section on the beginning of Ethel's friendship with the well-known harpsichordist Violet Gordon Woodhouse and also the beginning of her long friendship with Sir Thomas Beecham. She describes the benevolence of her patroness Mary Dodge not only in financial support for the performance of her works, but also in the provision of funds to purchase the land and building her house in Hook Heath, Woking- there is also an amusing sequence on Ethel's arguments with her architect. The third draft chapter deals mainly with her meeting with Mrs Pankhurst and subsequent suffragette matters up to 1914 and the outbreak of war. A copy of the handwritten draft has kindly been provided to the Surrey History Society by the University of Michigan where the original is held. As this material has never been published, the following edited version of Ethel's draft is offered.

The original manuscript is held by the University of Michigan, Ethel Smyth collection, 1910-1962, Box 2 [https://search.lib.umich.edu/catalog/record/004055092](https://search.lib.umich.edu/catalog/record/004055092). The University kindly gave Surrey History Centre a research copy of the memoirs which can be viewed at SHC ref Z/711).

Lewis Orchard, Ethel Smyth expert and Surrey History Centre volunteer has transcribed extracts of the memoirs below. Explanatory details have been added in italics.

**1908**

**Chapter 1**

“One must be prepared” said a wise friend of Vernon Lee’s “to begin life over again an unlimited number of times – to the very end”. Queen Victoria was not, I imagine, one of those who, when reeling under the most terrible blow that Destiny can deal to a devoted wife, realise that to be saddled with a duty one dare not neglect is a thing to be thankful for, since therein lies one’s sole hope of ultimate healing....In my own case it was not difficult to say where the blessed “must” lay: that “must” without which, as I have always felt, a human being is a rudderless ship.

I cannot exactly remember “what happened next” after Harry Brewster’s death...but I know that it was that summer that my sister, Mary Hunter, carried me off with her to Italy....

Mrs. Curtiss, (was) owner of beautiful Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal. The Curtisses were wealthy and highly cultivated Americans, related to John Sargent, the painter, who had long since brought them and Mary together. Not in Venice just now, they had put Palazzo Barbero at her disposal, reserving their own rooms and promising to turn up later on. On the other side of the Grand Canal were installed Madame Bulteau, and two ladies who lived with her in Paris – Madame Vacquez, her old governess, and Madame de la Baume, a budding authoress of a certain age. Well within reach were two young men of talent – painters and poets – who belonged
to Touche Bulteau's Parisian Court, and whose platonic affection, slightly tinged with
the usual more exciting element (for though plain, Touche was exceedingly
attractive) pleasantly mitigated what would otherwise have been an atmosphere of
undiluted elderly femininity. There was a fine string quartet in Venice just then
and Mary gave a musical party at which a quartet of mine, and I think one or two of
the Chamber Songs, were played, after which I went back to England.

That summer and autumn a friendship which I knew was going to be one of the chief
joys of my life took deep root. The Gordon Woodhouses, when not in London,
habituated a very beautiful stone-mullioned Elizabethan house not far from Stratford-
on-Avon (Nether Lypiatt Manor, Gloustershire). I stayed with them for three or four
weeks and once more... knew the bliss of a close loving alliance with one of my own
breed. The artistic instinct of Violet Woodhouse,...though most conspicuous of
course in music, is equally potent and infallible on most other fields, and there surely
was never a more ideal companion for an artist. I think I overtaxed her good nature
at first filling my sitting room with music paper, ink bottles, and paste pots......a good
deal of piano-thumping went on in my apartment.

At the time of The Wreckers concert Violet and I had heard a good deal of Thomas
Beecham but had never met him. Now, at last, there was time to attend some of the
concerts that eccentric genius was giving, the programmes of which were composed
solely of the works of totally unknown composers. In vain did his agent implore for
some classical decoy-duck here and there or at least some modern work accepted
everywhere but in England.....He administered them to the British public as a matter
of principle – a sort of Beecham’s Pills, one might say, for sluggish musical
digestions, and the patients were not grateful.....

That autumn I was in Paris for a day or two, and Winnie Polignac (Princesse de
Polignac, aka Winnaretta Singer) who knew Delius -- the one living composer of
whom Beecham had an exalted opinion, and was considered an Englishman – drove
me out to Grez-sur-Loing, near Fontainbleau, where the Deliuses lived. It was a
thousand pities, Delius said, the father and son were at daggers drawn, for it was in
Thomas’s power to do marvels for English music, and if he were only a little more
amenable to reason, the father would certainly not be averse to backing him.

Now Mary Dodge had been impressed by The Wreckers concert at the Queen’s Hall,
and one day she asked me about the possibilities of giving a Wreckers Week in
some West End theatre. Could my wonderful Beecham be roped into such a
scheme, and did I think £1000 would cover the damage? (there follows a long
passage about the performances and the trials and tribulations associated with them
and with Beecham’s antipathy towards singers).

I cannot help saying that just before my ears became unusable – that is some five or
six years ago, about 1937, Beecham carefully studied with me and performed at
Manchester, in flawless perfection, what is one of four compositions of mine to which
I can listen (or could) with almost unalloyed pleasure. It is a sort of vocal Symphony
the words of which are put together from Harry Brewster's metaphysical work, The
Prison....And to Beecham I therefore owe one of the few happy moments of my
musical life...He is by way of liking The Prison, and said he agreed with the estimate
of it pronounced by Neville Cardus that it is the most “important” choral work that has
appeared in his lifetime. But...he will never perform it again! Why? Because he is like that. But to speak of The Prison is to leap forward 20 years for it was in 1908 that I left England to find refuge from the turmoil of the Suffrage fight which was incompatible with artistic creation.

1909
Chapter 2
During the winter of 1909 I had been reminded by the owner of One Oak (Bagshot Road, Frimley) that my lease would be up in the following year, and as she intended to add a couple of rooms and do some modernising she feared, if I wished to stay on, that she must raise the rent, unless I cared to pay for the improvements myself. Now I was not an exacting tenant, and though the cottage suited me admirably I doubt if anyone else would have been willing to pay the rent I had meekly handed to her every quarter...

About the date we have now reached I went to stay with Mary Dodge in Ashdown Forest, and there my problem whether to stay at One Oak or not resolved itself, in that Mary said she thought I ought to have a house of my own, that I was to look out for one near enough to London to suit me, and close to a good golf course; that my old friend Muñie Delawarr (in the old days Muñie Brassey, Captain of the White Heather Cricket Club (a ladies cricket club for whom Ethel had played)...would help me to find the right thing. Eventually, as we could find nothing suitable, I was to buy a bit of ground and build for myself; for the cost of which Mary would provide. Muñie, the kindest and most efficient of mortals, instantly found exactly what I wanted – a derelict corner of Hook Heath, too small for the requirements of rich businessmen who build humble-looking yet sumptuous villas round suburban golf links. And the one I had always belonged to – the Woking Golf Course – is on Hook Heath!

To go back to my cottage. Connected with it is a tragedy which I am certain would not have happened had my architect been a woman! But the day of female architects had not yet dawned, and my choice fell on a Woking man I knew and liked – Arthur Messer by name - who had built a lot of houses in the neighbourhood. The moment for starting the cottage, which, owing to its place on the map, was already christened “Coign”, was favourable, for Bruno Walter was conducting two big choruses of mine in Vienna...so I settled to go there....Before leaving England I had drawn a map to scale of my property. It consisted of an oblong which lay on the side of the Hook Heath road size about 150 by 20 or 30 yards...beyond the south boundary fence was a big field full of cows (not mine), and beyond that the lovely valley of the Wey. I pointed out that the house should be slewed round a bit and not be flush with the road (E and W). “But why?” objected Messer, “it’s so much more natural for it to be square with the road...... Mr. Messer was so pressing in assuring me I need not come till the walls were up (like the conductors who always try to keep me away from rehearsals till is too late to correct the tempi they prefer to yours)...and hoped he had grasped that my will must be done. Need I say that when I reappeared at Woking – a week or two before the day I had proposed – it was to find that very deep foundations of the house had been laid square to the road......Seldom have I been so furious. The walls of the upper storey were rent down (some by my own hands) and a curt note sent to Mr. Messer......Had I been rich the foundations would have been relaid!
In a few months I was deep in what became for a few years my chief human preoccupation - the fight for woman's suffrage! I had just got a letter from a friend of Maggie Ponsonby’s, Lady Constance Lytton, one of Mrs. Pankhurst’s most valiant followers whom I knew slightly, asking me...what my views were on militancy. Bahr’s comment (Bahr was an Austrian friend of Ethel’s) was that he could not imagine how a woman like myself had not joined long ago, adding that whereas he thought the House of Commons on a lower debating level than any legislative body he had ever known, he had not heard one feeble speech from any of the militants.....That movement is the most alive thing in England today. (Ethel replied to Lady Constance’s letter having destroyed her original ‘rather frivolous’ draft), explaining that being so little in England nowadays, and so very busy, I had never gone deeply into the question of Women’s Suffrage, but that in a month or two I should be home again and hoped to make up for lost time.

Műnie (Mrs Delawarr, see above) and Mary Dodge were ardent militants, though I did not know how generously Mary had supported them financially; and the first thing I did was to attend, chaperoned by Műnie, one of Mrs. Pankhurst’s meetings. If I thought I should be a welcome recruit, I was to be disappointed. Mrs. Pankhurst, to whom Műnie introduced me, received me with marked coolness, as one who ought long ago to have joined them; and Christabel was still more aloof. But the personality and style of her mother swept me off my feet at once... The difficulty about music was brushed aside by Christabel with a touch of scorn, but her mother...at once understood how the land lay. Eventually I decided to give up two years to what I knew was wholly incompatible with artistic creation – the Suffrage fight – and then go back firmly to my own job.

1911
Chapter 3
Had I not given myself up for two years to the Suffrage, it would have meant feeling like a shirker, and a traitor, for the rest of my life. Who knew better than I the spiritual vested interest that in those days barred the way to women who mean business and it seemed to me my first duty to signify I was one of the fighters – to show by adhering to the militants in what spirit that long struggle for the vote was carried on. (There follows a transcript of a letter Ethel wrote to her sister Alice explaining her position in regard to militancy).

When I “did my bit” (as it was called) by making one of the 109 – I think that was our number – to each of whom was allotted a window in the house of the politician she particularly disliked I was anything but well, and unfortunately when I got to Holloway (the conviction of each of us being similar, two months in the second division) I found it next door to impossible to digest prison fare, so vilely was it prepared. I spoke about it to the Governor.....and when he said, about the waste of good food caused by the atrocious cooking, “I’m not a cook” he gave me a good opening for saying “that’s why there should be a female governor here!”. I had always, as Alice knew, thought all the world of women – but now I saw (and have never forgotten it) that they are bigger, more wonderful, than I had ever dreamed; that there were untapped reservoirs of faith and heroism, of depth in short, that surprised even me. Nearly all were humble working women, yet not one seemed to give a thought to the price they would probably pay for their action – but lived, like the early Christians, for an ideal, and were perfectly happy in so doing.
When my two months were over, being really ill, I went....to an amazing Massage Klinik in Wales where the doctor diagnosed “shortage of nerve force” and accumulation of “deposits” at base of spine....His cure was exactly what Murri had prescribed years ago in Italy – dead silence and repose “in the mountains” – but you can’t get that sort of thing in England in winter! so lying flat on my bed all day was the only alternative!

When I had “the cure” behind me an unpleasant surprise occurred shortly after my return home. Two policemen announced themselves one day at breakfast and said it was their painful duty to take me at once to the Woking Police Court, whence I was to be conveyed to Oxford to be tried on a charge of having burned down a house at Abingdon, in which were two children!

Now Major Eastwood, Nellie’s husband, had a remount job in Berkshire and with them I had recently stayed two nights in succession, one being the night on which I was accused of arson! I said that I could ring up Major Eastwood and prove my alibi in a few minutes, but the men of the law said they were forbidden to allow a prisoner to talk to anyone.....Anything more foolish than the arrest cannot be imagined. One of the guilty women was, it is true, a Miss Smyth, but the prime piece of evidence was that in the boat they had paddled down to their objective in, was found on of the “March of the Women” cards, which of course most militants possessed, and which bore my printed name! I had communicated with Nelly (Eastwood) I was touched to see her at the Court at Oxford and when she told me that her husband had been rung up before several privates at his office, his orderly transmitting the message, which was “the Public Prosecutor wishes to know whether the woman Ethel Smyth slept with you on the night of the 10th”...she was distinctly hurt by my shouts of laughter. Of course the charge was dismissed owing to “failure to identify” but not a word was said about the alibi! To the public prosecutor I had the pleasure of remarking that if one of our women had arrested anyone on such evidence she would have been dismissed for incompetence.

When my two years of political life were over, I was as decided as ever to go back to my own work, but found that to do this, if I stayed in England, was not humanly possible. I had got deeply fond of Mrs Pankhurst and admired her more than anyone I had ever met. Such horrors as some of the militants had already endured were obviously nothing compared with what was coming. She, an ingrained optimist, believed “now” the Government had understood that nothing but a serious bill, and a fair discussion of it by the Government, would ever arrest militancy, but the “torpedoing” of the so-called Conciliation Bill put an end to any such hopes, and it was evident that things would go from bad to worse. So I determined to go to Vienna, where I had good friends and the feeling that here if nowhere else, art was still alive, and a civic necessity. I did my best to settle down, but it was uphill work, for apart from every newspaper bringing news of the proceedings in London, I found that concentration was difficult. Also Woman Suffrage seemed to be a leading topic. Newspaper editors perpetually asked me to write little articles; getters-up of meetings implored me to address their audiences, in fact all that drove me from England was beginning here......in fact do all the things I had left England to avoid. And, of course, I knew what our besotted Government never took in, that even a diabolic measure like the “Cat and Mouse” Act would fail to kill militancy. And if they contrived, by using sheer force, to forcibly feed Mrs. Pankhurst, it would surely kill
her. How then could I refrain from rushing back to London? Ronald Storrs, who was at Cairo, being Oriental Secretary, or something of the sort to Lord Kitchener, had foreseen that I should not get away from the Suffrage in Vienna, and advised me in that case to send him a wire, to pack up my trunk, and depart for Egypt. Which I did directly after Christmas.

1914

...But Egypt was getting hotter and hotter, and one’s tennis-acquaintance shorter and shorter in temper, and as soon as I had finished The Boatswain’s Mate I started for Paris there to await Mrs. Pankhurst’s escape from England. She had had a terrible series of strikes (which included “water” strikes) and I guessed the authorities would be only too glad to look the other way when she should be sufficiently well to “escape” from dear Miss Pine’s nursing home. And so it turned out. I heard of a charming cliff golf course on the sea near S. Malo – S. Briac – and thither I went to receive Mrs. Pankhurst as soon as she should be fit to travel: and in about a week I was joined there by a ghost – what remained of the militant leader.

During my short stay in Paris the murder of the Austrian Crown Prince and his wife took place – but no one seemed to think it a portentous event likely to lead to war, and Mrs. Pankhurst said it was the same in England. Of course the so-called “leaders” will have known in both countries, but not the public.....as Christabel’s flat was still at her disposal, she and her mother decided to go to Paris and discuss the future. For my part I made for home, via Havre as quickly as I could, in spite of the loss of time and money involved in this apparently simple decision. Mrs. Pankhurst and her daughter followed later. Mrs. Pankhurst determined that the W.S.P.U. should at once be disbanded and all put the question of woman’s suffrage out of their heads and work for the survival of an Empire to vote in!

Ethel’s draft ends at this point. She died at her home in Woking on 9 May 1944.