



Women Writers' Suffrage League

Sowon Park (Oxford University)

Places: United Kingdom.

The Women Writers' Suffrage League was founded in June 1908 by playwright Cicely Hamilton and novelist Bessie Hatton. It was one of the earlier professional organizations of women writers in Britain, along with the Writers Club (1892) and the Lyceum club (1903). Their establishment marks a significant point in the process of the professionalisation of British women writers. Though the idea of a woman writer was nothing new in the early twentieth century, a writers' group comprising women of all classes offers a fresh perspective on the class-based Edwardian society, as well as on the Modernist literary landscape. That it was a writers' group and not a literary society indicate how it differed in nature and scope from other contemporary coteries such as the Imagists or the Vorticists or Bloomsbury. Whereas literary groups were formed around the idea of a text as the apotheosis of a highly individual expression, and conceived themselves as exclusive collectives of authors or poets in the high Romantic sense, the Women Writers' Suffrage League welcomed writers of every ideal and level. It defined a writer simply as one who had sold a text.

It was by no means sheer chance that the suffrage movement led to the league's organization. The suffrage campaign had politicized thousands of women of all classes, and women's organizations proliferated nationwide in an extremely wide range of professions from the Civil Service Suffrage Society to the Actresses' Franchise League. In the case of the latter, the league effected a dramatic improvement in the working conditions of actresses. [See Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own* (1992)] In the literary domain, the suffrage movement prompted a veritable explosion of literature. Poetry, songs, polemical essays, tracts, sketches, short stories, novels, plays, farces and burlesques by women appeared in unprecedented numbers. Not only did suffragism motivate many women to write for the first time, but many women also began to take an active role in literary production, publishing through numerous suffrage presses and distributing their work through suffrage shops or on street corners. Ranging in price from a penny . the price of a postage stamp in 1918 . to around one shilling and six pence, suffrage literature, in *quantitative* terms, marked a new epoch in the socio-cultural context of writing for women. The Women Writers' Suffrage League thus provided a base from which women writers could raise issues, bring isolated problems to collective awareness, and construct a sense of female agency by giving public voice to communal problems. The league attracted some of the most distinguished writers of the day, but its membership was not restricted to them. Indeed the most outstanding feature of the WWSL was its inclusiveness: provided that they were pro-suffrage, writers not only of every class and literary ideal but of both genders, and every political persuasion were welcome. Members ranged from 'New Woman' authors such as Sarah Grand (1854-1943) and Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), and 'popular' writers such as Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947) and Margaret Woods (1856-1945), to 'experimental' writers such as May Sinclair (1863-1946). It also included the mystical poet Alice Meynell (1847-1922), the novelist and 'society-hostess' Violet Hunt (1866-1943), Evelyn Sharp (1868-1955), a writer for the *Yellow Book* and a hunger-striking militant, and Ivy

Compton-Burnett (1884-1969). Approximately 400 writers were active members and in addition there were male writers, the honorary associates of the League. H. N. Brailsford, Laurence Housman, John Masefield and Ramsay MacDonald, all household names at that point, frequently gave speeches and produced pro-suffrage literature. Other well-known men who spoke and appeared at the WWSL meetings and congresses and wrote for the cause included Joseph Clayton, Rev. C. Hinscliffe, Frederick Pethick Lawrence, Saleeby Read, Pett Ridge, Richard Whiteing and Israel Zangwill. Their contribution is manifest in the *Standard* where more than half of the material in the 'Woman's Platform' was penned by men. New research in the field of men's participation for the cause dispels the idea of suffragism being, as Mrs Pankhurst saw it, 'the war of women against men', and is a potent reminder that the feminists who are held in the highest regard today - Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva - envisioned men and women working together for feminism.

The diversity and inclusiveness of the league in terms of political affiliation, class, gender, and literary inclinations made its members' writing admissible to different and consequently larger circles. Along with contributing to the obvious suffragist publications such as the *Vote*, *The Common Cause*, *The Suffragette*, *Votes for Women*, *Women's Suffrage News*, *Women's Suffrage Journal*, *Women's Suffrage*, *Women's Franchise*, *Women's Dreadnought*, and *The Independent Suffragette*, members of the WWSL attempted to reach the unconverted by engaging in public debate in conservative newspapers which were unmistakably anti-suffrage. The whetstone of anti-suffragism sharpened the rhetoric of suffrage and repudiating 'androcentrism' was a staple of their output. As stated in their manifesto, their main focus was on journalistic work to steer quickly-changing public opinion: its members would produce suffrage literature to ensure ventilation of the subject in such ways as are open to them -- by writing articles, taking part in newspaper correspondence.. It also announced that the aim of the WWSL was an equal franchise and its method would be one proper to writers . the use of the pen..

The bulk of the WWSL's output consisted of revisions of well-known songs, poems, sections from plays, novels and familiar narratives, such as fairy tales. Suffrage writers also parodied conventional myths and re-read famous anti-feminist works, mostly in article forms in suffrage journals. Such works, though not literary landmarks in themselves, are significant in the sense that they constructed a feminist discourse through discussion, circulation and analyses. The diversity of the works reflect the essence of the movement which, as an editorial in the *Vote* put it, was .simply a symptom of that desire to think, of that capacity for owning the world, for using our own brains, which has come to women.. Suffrage was merely the locale for the validation of feminist issues.

The WWSL did more than repudiate anti-feminist men writers. In conjunction with the Actresses' Franchise League, it gave innumerable matineés of plays and pageants, some to pay tribute to Shakespeare for portraying the varied qualities of women. In *Shakespeare's Dreams*, an arrangement by Beatrice Harraden and Bessie Hatton, Portia, Viola, Perdita, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, Kate, Beatrice, Puck, Ariel and Cleopatra each appear before the sleeping poet, saluting him, offering flowers, and reciting their best-known lines.

The WWSL's method may have been .the use of the pen., but its strategies, like those of other suffrage organizations, included the full drama of marches and public protests. The notions of impropriety attached to women demonstrating at all were countered by the womanliness and respectability of its participants, some of the writers being well-known and highly respected. Among an estimated fifteen thousand other women, the WWSL joined the first NUWSS demonstration of 13 June 1908. An exuberant contingent of more than a hundred WWSL members, all wearing scarlet and white badges fixed with quills, marched behind a dramatically appliquéd black, cream and gold velvet WWSL banner designed by Mary Lowndes. There were the league's leading figures: Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, Gertrude Warden, Alice Meynell, May Sinclair, Flora Annie Steel, Edith Zangwill and Mrs Havelock Ellis. It is interesting to see which women the WWSL chose to celebrate as role models on the elaborately embroidered banners for these are still revered today: Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Fanny Burney, George Eliot and Mary Wollstonecraft. The newspapers are univocal in praising the beauty and dignity of the processions and if one of

their main aims had been to purge the implications of women on the street, their success, at least as manifested in the daily papers, was unquestionable. The WWSL also participated in the suffrage processions of 18 June 1910 (the .From Prison to Citizenship. procession) and 17 June 1911 (.The Women's Coronation procession.), when the contingent walked under a new banner designed by a staunch male supporter, W. H. Margetson, brother-in-law of the founding member and secretary of the league, Bessie Hatton.

The WWSL sent delegates to various conferences held jointly with other suffrage organizations and hosted separate drawing-room .At Homes., in hotels and offices as well as members' homes, at which the League's literary positions and aspirations were articulated and discussed. It provided speakers and sold suffrage literature at public meetings. There were also author's readings, exhibitions, and book fairs, costume balls and cake and candy sales. The WWSL's fund-raising, advertising, and marketing were remarkably sophisticated and successful. One bookstall at the WSPU Women's exhibition at the Prince's Skating Rink in Knightsbridge, where autographed books donated by such suffrage sympathizers as John Galsworthy were sold, made seventy pounds, the equivalent of over three thousand pounds in 1999. The league also held literary contests for the best suffrage fiction and plays -- mostly, though not exclusively, open to first-time writers -- awarded prizes and recruited women to write, as well as provided the means for publishing.

With the advent of the Great War the focus of the WWSL changed. Like most other suffragist organizations it turned its attention to aiding the nation on the home front. An obvious form of service was to provide reading material for wounded soldiers, and Elizabeth Robins, Bessie Hatton and Beatrice Harraden set up a library in a military hospital in Endell Street, London. Reflecting the inclusiveness of its membership, the league circulated all types of fiction, the popular and the sensational. League members who had been writing plays for the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) continued to produce them for the Pioneer Players. The WWSL was formally dissolved on 24 January 1919, within a year of the passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which enfranchised around eight and a half million women. Although the league had not realized an equal franchise, its work was substantially done, and its members moved on to make feminist contributions to other organizations.

The Presidents of the WWSL were Elizabeth Robins (1908-12 and 1917-19) and Flora Annie Steele (1912-17).

Citation:

Park, Sowon. "Women Writers' Suffrage League". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 09 October 2002 [https://www.litencyc.com, accessed 20 November 2019.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](https://www.litencyc.com).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X