

The March of the Women

A BBC drama from 1974 highlights the tensions in writing feminist history.

June Purvis

IT IS 40 YEARS since *Shoulder to Shoulder*, a six-part BBC TV drama series about the suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), was first screened. Devised by the feminist film-maker, Midge McKenzie, together with Verity Lambert and Georgia Brown, the aim was to tell the story from the suffragette point of view, which, it was felt, had been almost erased from the history books. To do so, McKenzie interviewed aged suffragettes and also immersed herself in the archives.

Shoulder to Shoulder offers a sympathetic overview of suffragette deeds – from peaceful demonstrations to Parliament and assertive questioning of politicians, to illegal forms of protest, especially from 1912, when assaults on property, arson attacks, vandalising of postboxes and the smashing of shop windows in London's West End were carried out. The enthusiasm of the women is captured as they campaigned for their cause, as well as the disappointments when hopes were dashed by the Liberal government of the day. The anti-suffragist prejudices of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith are exposed, as is the cynical dealing of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George. The series does not shirk from showing the violence inflicted upon the women by the police.

One of the most harrowing scenes shows the forcible feeding of hunger-striking prisoner Emily Wilding Davison. Held down on a bed by wardresses, an unsuccessful attempt is made to force open her mouth, causing cuts to the lips. A rubber tube is then thrust up her nose which begins to bleed as the lining is lacerated. The overpowering physical force with which the operation is conducted makes forcible feeding, with its instrumental invasion of the body, seem more akin to rape than the 'ordinary hospital treatment' that the



Shoulder to Shoulder: Siân Phillips plays Emmeline Pankhurst in the BBC drama.

authorities claimed it to be.

Central to the story are the two main leaders of the WSPU, Emmeline Pankhurst (Siân Phillips), its founder and inspirational figurehead, and Christabel (Patricia Quinn), her eldest daughter and the WSPU's chief organiser and key strategist. But their presence is overshadowed by Sylvia (Angela Down), the middle Pankhurst daughter, who was not a key figure in the WSPU but a leader, from 1913, of its East London branch.

A socialist feminist, Sylvia's views were often at odds with those of Emmeline and Christabel, who kept the WSPU independent of men's political movements, at least at the central level, and emphasised the commonalities

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that all women shared, despite their class differences. Sylvia, on the other hand, wanted to ally the WSPU to the Labour movement. Further, her sibling rivalry with Christabel, their mother's favourite child, is apparent throughout the drama. The charismatic Emmeline is portrayed as a weak leader who defers to Christabel and leads the WSPU away from the path of socialism. She is also depicted as a bad mother who neglects her less favoured children, Harry, Adela and Sylvia herself.

The six plays that make up *Shoulder to Shoulder* follow this plot to varying degrees. In particular, the first and last episodes frame the drama. The opening play, 'The Pankhursts',

explores Pankhurst family life before the foundation of the WSPU. Although Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst are presented as being actively involved in socialist politics, the focus is on Sylvia's relationship with her idolised father, a radical lawyer. She alone is the serious child in the family, who stays with him when he is campaigning. The importance of the scene where Emmeline and some local socialist women establish the women-only WSPU in 1903 is almost incidental. Although Emmeline is introduced, all too briefly, as an inspiring leader, the suffragette movement is seen through the eyes of the unhappy Sylvia, angry socialist, rejected daughter.

The aim of the WSPU was never just votes for women: it wanted wider social reforms that would end women's subordinate role within the family, education and employment, as well as their exclusion from large areas of public life. But none of this features in *Shoulder to Shoulder*. It is only Sylvia among the Pankhursts who is presented as wanting a social revolution that would bring equality for women, a theme particularly evident in the final episode.

When in 1918 enfranchisement is won for certain categories of women over the age of 30, the focus is again on Sylvia. It is she and her working-class women in the East End of London who have won this victory. Yet it was Emmeline, not Sylvia, who inspired thousands of women to fight for votes for women in a women-only movement unparalleled in British history. It was she who shaped a new idea of womanhood, shaking society into a new pattern that could not be reversed. So why does *Shoulder to Shoulder* focus on Sylvia?

It is a product of its time. McKenzie and her associates took Sylvia Pankhurst's autobiography, *The Suffragette Movement*, as their key text. This was in tune with feminist history in the UK at the time. Both *Shoulder to Shoulder* and *The Suffragette Movement* raise important questions about how the history of feminism is written and, in particular, how feminist daughters and sisters represent their feminist mothers, who are public figures, and each other.

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