

SYLVIA AS A PROFESSIONAL LECTURER

North American-British lecture tours were a well-established phenomenon by the time Sylvia travelled to America in 1911. From the mid-nineteenth century, these tours became increasingly professionalised and involved a prominent figure lecturing in various locations where they would be hosted and guided around local institutions and points of interest, often providing inspiration for further literary work. Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Matthew Arnold were just three of the British authors who toured America in the nineteenth century, while figures travelling in the other direction included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain and Henry James.³¹ Campaigning networks developed tours along similar lines, beginning with the American anti-slavery movement. In 1845, Frederick Douglass, having escaped slavery, provided first-hand accounts of its horrors during a hugely successful lecture tour of Britain. Emmeline Pankhurst would proudly recall that her father was on the welcoming committee for the lecture tour of Henry Ward Beecher, the abolitionist campaigner and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the popular anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.³² As the labour and socialist movements developed, they too organised lecture tours – in 1886, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling undertook a similar route to Sylvia's and later published a book based on their research and experiences titled *The Working Class Movement in America*.³³ Meanwhile, as previously mentioned, Keir Hardie toured and published his impressions on three separate occasions. The women's suffrage movement likewise forged links across the Atlantic Ocean, with members of the British National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) corresponding, reading their counterparts' publications and hosting travelling speakers attending international conferences.³⁴

The WSPU's tactical and organisational separateness from the non-militant NUWSS did not facilitate their inclusion into these pre-established networks; when the Pankhursts toured America they relied upon professional lecturing agencies, who promoted their speakers as celebrities, and secured bookings in conjunction with American suffragists sympathetic to militancy. Using professional agencies allowed for the individual lecturer to benefit financially from the tour. Emmeline Pankhurst's first tour of America in late 1909 was in part motivated by her need to raise money for medical treatment for her seriously ill son,

Harry, who died shortly after her return in January 1910. For Sylvia, who strove to maintain her independence by not joining the WSPU payroll, both the 1911 tour, organised by the Civic Lecture Forum Bureau, and the 1912 tour, organised by the successor to and former secretary of the Bureau, William B. Feakins, provided an opportunity to earn a living.

The challenges of a commercial tour

The fund-raising objective informed the nature of the tours. Sylvia had come to America around the time that a number of extremely wealthy individuals were taking an interest in the suffrage cause; their support could ensure much-needed financial assistance for the travelling lecturer as well as for the domestic suffrage movement. Towards the end of her first tour, on 6 April 1911, Sylvia attended the suffrage luncheon club in New York run by Alva Belmont, 'the millionaire Suffragist', who was among the campaign's very richest supporters.³⁵ Three days later, the *San Francisco Examiner* claimed that 'Mrs Belmont offered to pay Miss Pankhurst's expenses, and these will run up to the many thousands'.³⁶ In fact, Sylvia's fees were not paid by a sole donor – her expenses were paid by a number of local groups – but whether or not Belmont was among the contributors, Sylvia's tour was nevertheless dependent upon groups or individuals advancing enough money to pay her lecturing fees and with the resources to fund or arrange accommodation. Hosted by wealthy supporters, Sylvia's speeches in large venues were often combined with smaller luncheon and dinner gatherings in which she was the guest of honour. A select group of eminent and powerful individuals would be invited with the intention of using Sylvia's moving account of the British suffrage struggle to win their adherence. Thus, on 14 February 1911, Sylvia spoke at the Smith Opera House under the auspices of the Geneva Political Equality Club in Geneva, New York, and was also the guest of honour at the lunch held by that organisation's leading members, Elizabeth Miller and her daughter Anne. Also invited to the Millers' luncheon at their extensive house and grounds by Seneca Lake were two local attorneys and a former loyal mayor.³⁷

Many of the suffrage events emulated the elegant functions that Sylvia's hosts were accustomed to attending in their social lives. When Sylvia spoke at the Columbia Theatre in Washington, DC on the celebrated 'Washington's birthday', on 22 February 1911, the stage was lavishly adorned with potted plants and palms that had been loaned by local