

clothing, drawing remarks in the press on her 'uncorseted figure'.⁸¹ One male interviewer in Kansas invasively commented that 'to the unpractised masculine eye she appeared to be uncircled by a corset'.⁸² The American press sought her opinion on clothing, although it was apparent she did not think this particularly important; asked whether the harem skirt was emancipatory for allowing women greater movement Sylvia replied that fashion 'seems a trivial matter to me; adding '[c]ertainly the harem skirt is not a vital factor. Let the women emancipate their heads, and their feet will take care of themselves'.⁸³

Lurking behind such enquiries about her romantic life and clothing was the popular caricature of militant suffragettes as frustrated unwomanly women, for whom the fulfilment of their 'natural' desires would displace their misplaced interest in manly politics. Sylvia did not escape such treatment in the newspapers' 'humorous' columns: 'Miss Sylvia Pankhurst, being both young and handsome, will likely fall in love with some live American when she comes to this country. In that case she will marry, perhaps, and really not care a rap whether the women ever vote or not'.⁸⁴ Women's campaigns for political representation, and militancy in particular, had destabilised restrictive proscriptions about women's role. Trivialising suffragettes was one means of reasserting those restrictions. Sylvia's vocal resistance to being trivialised was thus intimately bound up with the defence of her cause.

MILITANCY

The appeal of militancy

Sylvia's professional lectures worked in conjunction with local suffrage campaigning organisations that sought to associate themselves with, or attract an audience by, the dynamism of the militant suffragettes. The American suffragist Harriot Stanton Blatch had organised Sylvia's first public engagement in America, a lecture at New York's Carnegie Lyceum, which secured her the necessary welcoming suffrage audience and fanfare for a wider tour. Beside Sylvia on the platform were such prominent figures as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Dr Anna Shaw and Mrs Katharine Houghton Hepburn, a leading suffragist from Connecticut (her daughter later became a Hollywood actress famous for portraying independent and courageous women). Stanton Blatch had extended invitations to militant suffragettes since 1908, when she organised for Annie

Cobden Sanderson to address a New York audience, followed a year later by Emmeline Pankhurst. In so doing, she was consciously attempting to use the militant suffragettes to effect a change in the American suffrage movement, a process which Sylvia alluded to in her 'impressions' from the 1911 tour:

All over America the Suffragists declare that they have gained hope and inspiration from our own great British movement. In the early days of our long struggle it was we who drew our inspiration from them. Our movements act and react on each other. We may spur each other on to renewed zeal. We and the world have much to gain from our joint effort.⁸⁵

Sylvia was referring to what one historian has termed 'a transatlantic network of radical suffragists' that had been developed by Stanton Blatch's mother, the leading nineteenth-century American suffrage campaigner Elizabeth Cady Stanton, over seventy years before.⁸⁶

Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had organised the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York State in 1848; they had been prompted, it was said, by their experience at the first anti-slavery conference in London in 1840 where they were excluded from the main audience because of their sex. In London, Cady Stanton had developed a network of friendships with abolitionist and women's rights campaigners to whom her daughter Harriot looked when she lived in England in the 1880s and 1890s. It was through these networks that she came to join the Women's Franchise League, a suffrage organisation in which Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst were involved and with whom she became friends; as children Christabel and Sylvia were sent to Basingstoke, where Stanton Blatch lived, to play with her daughter Nora who was close to them in age. Nora would later be among those seated on the platform of the Lyceum when Sylvia spoke there in 1911.

The Women's Franchise League was founded in 1889 to campaign for votes for women regardless of their marital status at a time when the larger suffrage organisations were prepared to express support for Bills that would only enfranchise unmarried women. League members argued that to support the suffrage on this basis would strengthen the status of coverture, the denial of a married woman's independent legal existence, which many of them had worked hard to overturn – Richard Pankhurst, for example, had drafted the 1882 Married Women's Property Act. At