8. Sylvia Pankhurst wearing the portcullis and prison arrow brooch she designed which was awarded to all suffragettes who had experienced imprisonment. This signed photograph was preserved in the scrapbook of Elizabeth Smith Miller and her daughter Anne Fitzhugh Miller, leading suffragists in Geneva, New York whom Sylvia visited in February 1911. (Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, Scrapbook 9 [1910–1911], Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

had worked'.[2] As with the question of women's sweated labour, however, Sylvia found herself under pressure to flatter her hosts for their superior conditions, to which she responded by undertaking her own research during her tour. She told one reporter: 'Having served two terms in jail I have taken every convenient chance to visit the jails in different cities.'[3] Although she visited prisons in her second tour, all four of the prisons described here date from visits made during her 1911 tour.

Harrison Street Jail in Chicago, the second prison to be discussed here, was the first of the four that Sylvia visited alongside Zelie Emerson in the last days of the garment workers strike (see Introduction, p. 43). The description contained here is a much shorter version of the article Sylvia wrote for the *Chicago Tribune* in which she stated that the unsanitary conditions she witnessed at Harrison Street undermined claims of 'new world' superiority in this area:

> Whilst I have been in America I have constantly been told that had the suffragets [*sic*] been fighting for 'votes for women' in this country, they never would have been subjected to the treatment which they have received in England, but some of the facts I learned this morning have led me to feel that reformers all over the world have an almost equally hard fight before them.[4]

So profound was Sylvia's sense of horror at Harrison Street Jail that it became the example by which she measured the other prisons she visited. Commenting on the prison in Ottawa, which she visited in early February and which is discussed briefly in this chapter, Sylvia decried the lack of activity and reading material for the inmates but was able to provide an equivocal assessment – 'in many respects better than those visited elsewhere' – because of the example of Harrison Street: 'The worst jail I have visited on this continent was one at Chicago where men and women are kept in darkened cells, serving 30 day terms in a building without any civilized sanitary equipment, the drain being actually an open sewer.'[5]

Sylvia visited the first prison described here, Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, in early April 1911. Opened in 1829 by reformers who advocated the principles of combining total solitary confinement with hard labour, it would be condemned by Charles Dickens, who visited in the 1840s, for reducing the prisoner to 'a man buried alive'.[6] The system of solitary confinement was breaking down when Sylvia visited; indeed, she noted the cells were overcrowded and whilst she expressed her disapproval at this, she was pleased to see that the prisoners were allowed to develop their artistic talents. The local press were thus able to report: 'It is quite a pleasure to know that the eastern penitentiary meets the approval of Miss Sylvia Pankhurst, the English suffragist … She found some things to criticize, of course, but her impressions were generally cheerful.'[7]