

**Rise Up Women:** THE MILITANT CAMPAIGN OF THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION, 1903-1914. Andrew Rosen. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974. Pp. 312.

The women's suffrage movement in Britain has received remarkably little careful, analytic treatment from historians.

In recent years there have been a number of good popular books about the suffrage movement in Britain, all of them focusing on the Militants, whose activities and leading personalities lend themselves to a popularised account. The most recent of these, Midge Mackenzie's Shoulder to Shoulder (which was inspired by the B.B.C. television series) has a fascinating collection of photographs and would make an excellent gift. But Shoulder to Shoulder, like most popularisations, tends to overemphasize the leading personalities and relies uncritically on their self-perceptions. This is also the case with another good popularisation, Antonia Raeburn's The Militant Suffragettes (1973).

Books like The Militant Suffragettes and Shoulder to Shoulder have the great merit of making their material easily accessible to the reader who is unfamiliar with the subject. Rosen's Rise Up, Women! is an attempt to do something quite different. Rosen says he has produced the first "full length scholarly monograph based on extensive research into archival source material" on the Women's Social and Political Union. In

spite of any criticisms that one can make of his book, it must be admitted that it is a careful, detailed study and that all those who have a serious interest in the field will find it valuable.

Rosen provides us with a thorough analysis of the WSPU from its Independent Labour Party origins in Manchester in 1903 up to the beginning of the First World War. He gives his reader a full explanation for the organization's rise from obscurity to the period after 1906, when it became the most prominent of the suffrage organizations. His account of the rise of militancy and of its significance is interesting and suggestive, as is his interpretation of the character and the motives of the Pankhurst leadership. His analysis of the relationship between the WSPU and the police, press and government is more extensive than any given before in a secondary account. Rosen provides new information through his analysis of such factors as the average age of members of the WSPU at various periods, and of the WSPU's finances, and he offers for the first time a reliable estimate of the amount of damage done during the arson campaign of 1913. In short, this is the best account so far of the history of the WSPU and will undoubtedly remain the "definitive" work for some time.

I say this rather grudgingly, because in my view the book suffers from a num-

ber of serious deficiencies. The most serious overall deficiency is that the book is too narrow in its scope. I hesitate to make this criticism because all too often attacks on women's history as "narrow" are made by fundamentally hostile, antifeminist critics. For many people, the idea of a historical interpretation which perceives women as central is threatening--threatening to cherished perceptions of the present as well as of the past. I am not suggesting then that the WSPU is too limited a subject to serve as a central focus for a monograph of this size, but rather that Rosen sees his subject in isolation, and that this limits the usefulness of his study. He would have written a better book had he been able to give us more of a sense of the WSPU's relationship to other political institutions, especially to other suffrage organizations, and had he been able to draw into his analysis a greater sensitivity to the general social and economic context.

Rosen does not really confront the problem of class cleavage, for example: he merely makes the usual remarks about the middle-class nature of the suffrage movement. After my own excursions into some of the archival material to which Rosen had access, I think that the relationship of the various suffrage organizations to working-class women and to the (predominantly male) organized labour movement is still largely unexplored and that an examination of this relationship would be of great value to

an understanding of the way in which both women's position in society and organized feminism were molded by class structure. It is clear to me that both the WSPU and the Women's Freedom League (the other important "militant" group) had a very different perception of working-class women from that of the "constitutional" groups represented by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. It is unfortunate that Rosen did not examine this issue more fully.

Rosen also fails to deal fully enough with the relationship of the issue of "the Vote" to other sorts of issues that concerned the suffragists. They span a wide spectrum and include such diverse concerns as educational reform and social purity. A sensitivity to these issues and a greater awareness of the differences they created among suffrage activists would have enriched Rosen's interpretation. For instance, his treatment of the WSPU's 1913 campaign against venereal disease--embodied in Christabel Pankhurst's "The Great Scourge and How to End It"--is incomplete because he is not fully aware of the Social Purity issue. In Christabel's "Great Scourge" articles she insisted on the prevalence of venereal disease among men in Britain and asserted that only independence (symbolized by the Vote) could rescue women from infection, because only then could women insist on a single standard of purity. Although Rosen does admit that Christabel Pankhurst's ideas

about continence and prostitution were not unusual, he claims that her views about the prevalence of syphilis were peculiar to her. This is not in fact the case: reputable medical doctors had been making such statements as far back as the 1870s, during the Contagious Diseases Acts controversy. The claims were undoubtedly exaggerated, but Christabel Pankhurst was not alone in making them. Nor was the WSPU unusual in emphasizing "Purity" at this time: both Suffrage and Antisuffrage groups had taken up the issue. In discussing the "Great Scourge," Rosen says: "It is not easy to explain why the officials and ordinary members of the WSPU neither took exception to Christabel's allegations nor questioned seriously her fitness to continue to set WSPU policy." If he had done some reading in the popular press with a view to exploring this issue, he would have known that few WSPU members would have questioned her judgement because in fact her statements were less exaggerated than many that were being made at the time.

Rise Up, Women!'s other serious weakness is one that feminist historians especially will find irritating. Rosen indulges in a considerable amount of ill-considered psycho-history in his attempts to analyse the personalities of the suffragettes. While it is commendable that he has made a systematic attempt to illuminate the character and motives of the membership of the WSPU

as distinct from the leadership, his attention is directed for the most part to the age and marital status of the women. Throughout the book, I find his preoccupation with marital status unjustifiable--especially since he presents the category "unmarried" as if it were self-explanatory. One suspects that, like their contemporary opponents, Rosen believes that the suffragettes were a group of frustrated spinsters. In a recent review in the Times Literary Supplement the social historian Brian Harrison (whose judgement on most matters is better than it is on feminism) has said that he thinks a feminist perspective is a liability to anyone attempting women's history: but I think that Rosen's trivializing and insensitive approach might have been avoided had he been more aware of the issues raised by the women's movement. Rosen is at his weakest when his insensitivity to the social and economic context is combined with his insensitivity to the issues raised by feminism. For example, in the chapter in which he discusses the background of the early WSPU activists he gives a brief sketch of the lives of Annie Kenney, Hannah Mitchell and Teresa Billington-Greig. The most significant characteristic that these three women shared is that, unlike the majority of suffrage activists, they did not come from middle-class backgrounds. (Annie Kenney and Hannah Mitchell were definitely working class: Teresa Billington's family was on the borderline between

the working and lower middle class). Rosen does recognise this fact but, in his attempts to arrive at an explanation for the activism of these three women, he emphasizes certain similarities he sees in their family lives: according to him, they all had ineffectual fathers, dominant mothers and unsatisfactory or non-existent husbands. In all three cases, he has grossly distorted the evidence. In Hannah Mitchell's autobiography The Hard Way Up, for example, Mitchell does express a considerable amount of bitterness. Rosen's assessment is that this bitterness is directed against her husband and against marriage and motherhood. This is a seriously faulty reading: Hannah Mitchell's anger is directed primarily against an economic structure which made her experience of motherhood and family life much more difficult than necessary. Hannah Mitchell's life was dedicated to the working-class movement: to her, the women's movement was part of the struggle. To explain away her social commitment by unfounded comments about her personal relationships is to indulge in the sort of analysis which assumes that women can exist only as private beings.

In conclusion then, although Rosen's book is valuable, it does have major weaknesses, and much work remains to be done on the British suffrage movement in general and on the Militants in particular. To date, we do not even have satisfactory biographies of the leading figures in the movement. Suffrage is unfashionable among the current genera-

tion of young British feminist historians, and this seems to me to be unfortunate, although understandable--the first accounts of the rise of feminism in Britain did overemphasize the suffrage struggle. But it was of great importance, and good analyses of the suffrage movement can contribute to an understanding of those aspects of women's history which now seem of paramount significance, such as women's position in the family and in the workplace.

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