

“They Laughed at Danger”¹

Reclaiming Space in *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette*

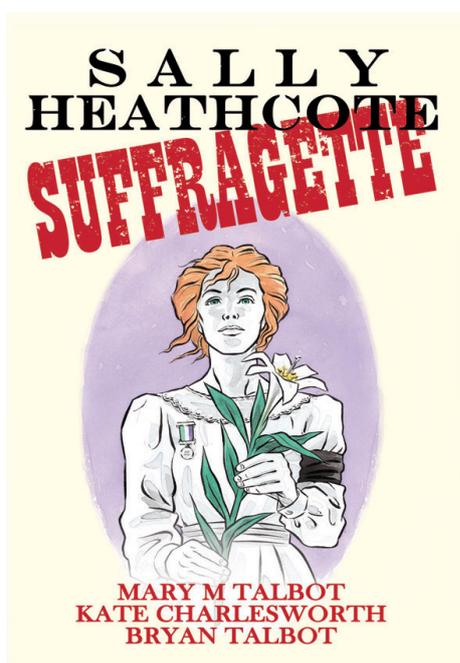
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In the UK, 2018 saw not only the centenary of the end of the First World War but also that of finally granting the vote to women. The Museum of London staged a special exhibition, an abundance of academic books and articles like Jane Robinson’s *Hearts and Minds* (2018) were published, magazines from *The Big Issue* to *Time Out London* ran feature articles, the film “Suffragette” told their story from a working-class woman’s point of view

and the courageous fighters for suffrage also made it into a graphic novel, *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* (2014) by Mary M. Talbot (text), Kate Charlesworth (illustrations) and Bryan Talbot (lettering, detailed layouts), significantly also told from a lower class perspective.

While issues of class, militancy and gender identities have received ample attention, an aspect neglected in most reassessments of the suffrage movement is their success in reclaiming public space, a notion which lends itself ideally to the graphic novel as the interplay between words and images makes it a very powerful medium for re-visualising events from the historical archive. After a short overview of the history of the suffrage movement, which forms the backdrop to *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette*, I will discuss the various ways in which suffragettes broke out of their spatial confinement and how this is represented in the graphic novel.



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Women's Suffrage in Context

While it sounds grand to proclaim that women won the vote a hundred years ago, this information does not tell the whole story. First of all, as already mentioned in our editorial, it was only women over 30 who had property and not all women, who could take part in elections in 1918. The right to vote on the same terms as men only followed a decade later in 1928 with the Equal Franchise Act. And, secondly, while this is celebrated as a unique British achievement hardly ever alluding to a global framework, Britain was, in fact, quite late in including women in the electorate at all. The first country ever to enfranchise all women was New Zealand as early as 1893 (including Maori women), followed by Australia in 1902 (but here only white women were allowed to vote) and Finland in 1906 (cf. for more details Mukherjee 2018, 72-83). It is also conveniently forgotten that Britain was still an Empire at the end of the First World War with the fight for voting rights also being on the agenda of various colonised countries (often together with the struggle for independence). Finally, when talking about the centenary of voting rights for women in 2018, it should also be taken into account that the vote was far from the only demand women put forward. In fact, the so-called suffragists and suffragettes are part of the first wave of a

much more inclusive feminist movement.

A Very Short History of the British Suffrage Movement

But the campaign for women's rights had started even earlier than that. Already in the 17th century female authors like Judith Drake and Mary Astell had demanded a better education for women, and towards the end of the 18th century writers like Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft already went much further in their claims. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft famously declared in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that women were just as rational as men and, as a consequence, were worthy of being given an equal education, trusted with equal occupations and granted equal citizenship. Her ideas are a direct response to Enlightenment philosophers, whose campaigns for equality and freedom only included white men. Sadly, Wollstonecraft died early in 1796, and around 1800, triggered by fear of the excesses of the French Revolution, a general rollback set in, among other things cementing traditional gender roles. Thus, in the 19th century women in Britain still did not have many rights or opportunities to live a life not dominated by men, be it in the form of fathers, husbands or sons. They were not supposed to get proper schooling, let alone enter universities, and while working-class women had to supplement the meagre wages of their husbands

by working in factories or as domestic servants for even lower wages than their male counterparts, middle-class women were reduced to become “angels in the house” and thus mostly relegated to the “private sphere”. Ideologically they were supposed to personify the morality of the family, in practical terms their range of activities was restricted to organising the household and being mothers, which spelt into a severe limitation of their access to public space.

Taking these conditions into account, it comes as no surprise that the idea to demand the vote came from middle-class women. But it was not just that. They also asked for wide-reaching reforms to end women’s economic, social and political subordination. In order to achieve their aims, non-militant suffragists first sought the support of men sympathetic to their cause who were supposed to present their various petitions for the enfranchisement of middle-class women in parliament. In 1868 Millicent Fawcett founded the NUWSS, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, as an umbrella organisation for the various suffrage societies that had sprung up all over the country. Out of frustration with not getting any further where their demands were concerned, in 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst finally initiated the much smaller WSPU, the Women’s Social and Political Union, with the aim

of getting women enfranchised even if this meant to break with the ideal of the well-behaved female by employing, among other means, militant tactics. These ideas “were born of despair after years of patient constitutionalism” (Rowbotham 1977, 84) and represented a new way of campaigning.

The militant tactics employed by the WSPU included women chaining themselves to railings, hackling at meetings or smashing windows but after 1912, when the violence escalated, arson and small bombs also became part of their repertoire. The suffragettes were convinced that only “Deeds Not Words”, the famous slogan of the WSPU, could convince the government to grant women the right to vote. Their actions were by no means without risk: in 1913, the movement had its first martyr when Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby.

While the government was initially at a loss of how to deal with these women, who also dared to go on hunger strikes to be regarded as political prisoners when they were sentenced to time in jail, they soon came up with the Prisoner’s (Temporary Discharge for Illness) Act, the notorious Cat and Mouse Act (1913). This bill stipulated that women were set free from prison when they became too weak after refusing to eat and being force-fed, only to be jailed again once they had regained their strength.

But the suffragettes were not deterred and continued their militant campaign.

The impasse between government and suffragettes might have gone on for much longer if the First World War had not interrupted domestic affairs. The war deeply affected the movement for female suffrage as it divided both, the NUWSS and the WSPU, with regard to the attitudes of their individual members concerning the appropriate reaction to the war. While leading figures like Sylvia Pankhurst, who was a pacifist, did not join the “war effort”, others like Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst dedicated themselves to service at the home front. As we have seen, some women were granted the right to vote after the war had ended, and Constance Markievicz became the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons.

Reclaiming Political and Public Space

Interestingly enough, it is mainly the campaigns of the WSPU that have become part of collective memory when remembering the fight for female voting rights. The tactics employed by militant suffragettes (as opposed to the NUWSS’s peaceful suffragists) certainly contributed to exploding gender stereotypes. But what is also significant with regard to the militant actions as well as the numerous marches staged by the suffrage unions is the “spatiality of resistance” (Mitchell 2000, 201) with women

appearing in public places which they had formerly been discouraged to enter.

Don Mitchell has shown how women have often been limited in following their political and social aims by a restriction of the spaces open to them (cf. Mitchell 2000, 200f.). Women at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were still suffering from the notion of separate spheres and especially middle-class women were likely to cause a scandal when they were seen at places not deemed suitable for them. These limitations on the accessibility of space work so well because all kinds of spatial confinements are made to seem natural by discourse and have been normalised. But the suffragettes did not accept these restrictions any longer and actively embarked on a reclamation of political and social spaces which seemed to belong by unspoken consent to the male domain. In the course of their campaigns, they not only changed the everyday lived space of their homes but, even more importantly, became visible in an unprecedented way in political spaces like the Parliament building (whose Ladies Gallery was soon closed to women) but also public spaces like Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park, which were meaningfully chosen as starting points for the suffragettes’ marches, an early example of reclaiming the streets.

Graphic Novels and the Representation of Space

As already mentioned, graphic novels with their juxtaposition of words and images lend themselves very well to explorations of space. In this respect, they differ markedly from the time-dominated kind of story-telling employed by novels as the graphic novel's "most visible medium-specific feature is the importance given to space (as a dimension of world-making), a notably undervalued aspect in traditional narratology" (Baetens & Frey 2015, 167).

Sally Heathcote, Suffragette is no exception in this respect as it does not only visualise different spaces but also sets them in opposition to each other to show the differences brought about by the suffragettes. The graphic novel follows the eponymous fictional character of Sally, a housemaid, whom we first encounter as an old woman in the confined space of a bedroom in Park Place Nursing Home in Hackney. The point in time in this first panel is given as "Autumn 1969" (and this is not chosen randomly as 1969 marks the year when the voting age in the UK was lowered to 18). Sally is asleep, but in the foreground of the opening splash panel all kinds of colourful suffragette paraphernalia like medals and banners are cleverly depicted. Thus, the opening page already signals the principles of handling colour for the whole work: while panels are generally

rendered in sepia tones of black and white, the WSPU's colours of green, white and violet (short for "Give Women the Vote") are cleverly used in certain panels throughout the novel to highlight their importance while they seem to take on a life of their own. Already on this very first page the suffragettes' bright colours stand out against the bleak surroundings.

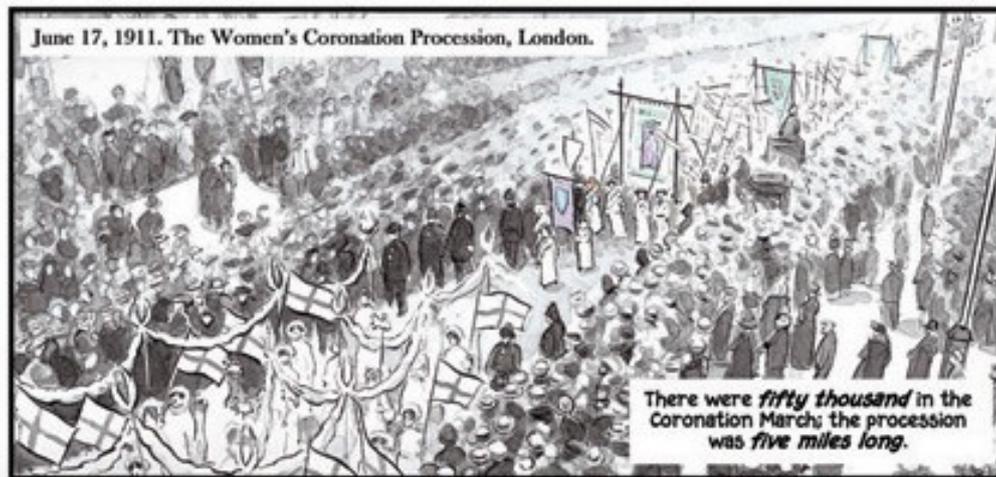
While we follow Sally Heathcote's development from maid via militant suffragette to pacifist, her memories are set in a wider context. Thus, the graphic novel is divided into three parts which focus on the history of the WSPU until July 1916 alongside Sally's story and her involvement in the movement. Sally is easily recognisable throughout the whole novel because her hair is always rendered in ginger (next to the green, white and violet of the suffragettes nearly the only colour that is used). While mostly drawn in grids with small and bigger panels used in juxtaposition, at intervals there are splash panels to highlight the importance of specific events or to establish public and private spaces important for the character's development. Throughout, various source materials like cartoons from *Punch*, newspaper cuttings or actual posters, badges and banners are used and cleverly reworked to give the graphic novel a realistic touch (the historical background to all these objects is explained in the comprehensive appendix which

also includes a timeline). While there are quite a number of panels actually set in domestic or office settings, it is striking that many show women in public spaces like Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square, which grant them a high degree of visibility: their marches and militant actions symbolise the suffragettes' resistance to the dogma of female public invisibility and restriction to the private sphere.

Confined Spaces: Household and Home

Talbot, Charlesworth and Talbot fruitfully use Sally's story to highlight the importance of space by

At the beginning of the graphic novel, we meet Sally when she is still a maid in the Pankhurst household in Manchester. Despite this being a progressive household (Emmeline Pankhurst "saved" her from the workhouse), Sally's early perspective is that of a mere bystander when famous supporters of women's suffrage meet in the Pankhurst home. Sally is not invited to become part of the movement nor is she regarded as a person in her own right. The lack of her employer's concern becomes clearly visible when she is left to her own devices on the Pankhursts' move to London in 1907. Sally has to look for a new position and 'home',



Suffragettes Marching and Reclaiming Public Space. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

also exploring its opposite: confinement. Especially for domestic servants and maids normalised restrictions were an unquestioned part of their everyday lives. It was a decisive factor of their predicament that they were subject to a complete lack of private space as they were dependent on their employers for housing and had to adhere to the rules if they did not want to end up on the streets.

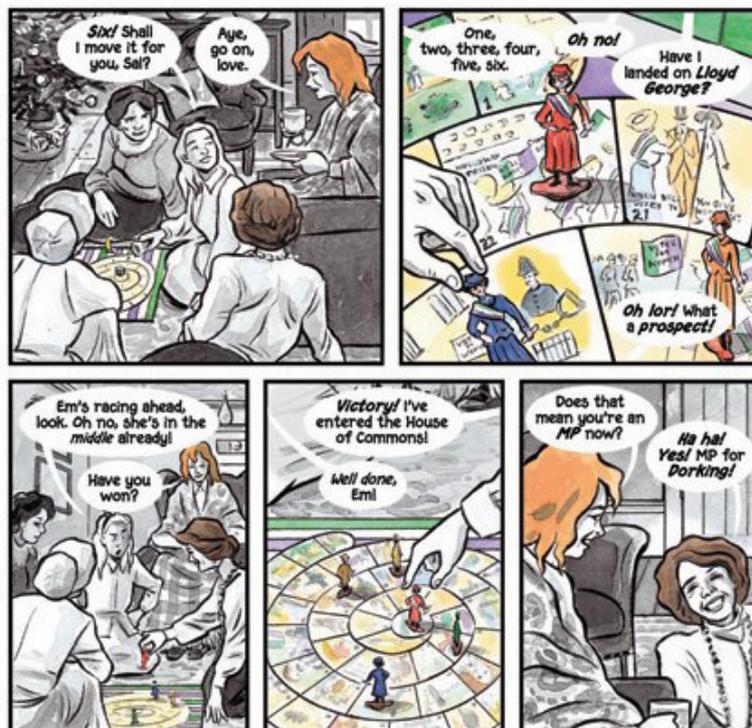
which she finds in the household of socialist MP Victor Grayson.

Here, Sally's reduction to a mere domestic position as opposed to being an individual becomes even worse. Her "big ideas" (Talbot et al. 2014, 32) about women's suffrage are not appreciated by the other servants while she is invisible for Grayson. Additionally,

in stark contrast to the reclamation of space by the suffragettes depicted later, Sally's new home turns out to not only confine her but also becomes a scene of domestic violence when she is subject to sexual assault by a male servant. When Sally fights back, it is her who is sacked as this is deemed unruly behaviour in a woman. It is only at this point that Sally decides to look for a better life in London as the urban space of the city seems to hold promises for her being finally able to subvert her former class-based gender role. Sally's story also serves as a strong reminder that the voices of marginalised women, be they workers or maids, have been largely forgotten and silenced as there were only few being able to write their memoirs or publish their diaries after the vote had been won.

The profound changes brought about by women fighting for their rights are not least visible in the new private spaces they carved out for themselves. This is also true for Sally's altered living conditions in London. Finally, she has a room to call her own and despite her having to work hard to make a living, the panels showing her in her room are dominated by sunny yellows, the same colour scheme used later on when she falls in love with Arthur, one of the male working-class supporters of the WSPU.

Next to these conventional living arrangements, the graphic novel also explores alternative forms of refashioning the private sphere. Thus the convalescence home in Holmwood, where hunger striking suffragettes go after their release from prison,



Creating New Forms of Communitiy. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

differs markedly from the home as a space of everyday confinement. In the quiet of the country, the women embark on reading and playing board games like Pank-a-Squith, one of the many branded articles the WSPU developed for their followers, while embracing new forms of communality.

Public Spaces: Office and City

This spirit of communality also distinguishes the WSPU's headquarters in London, a semi-official space which is important for preparing all kinds of suffragette activities. The resulting women's rallies and meetings pay tribute to the fact that the suffragettes reclaim the public and political spheres formerly closed to women which finds not only an expression in their hackling at political meetings and their marches but also in their new-found mobility which has them travelling to other parts of the country.

To emphasise the broad base of the movement, the second part, "The March of the Women", features an opening splash panel depicting all the important suffragists and suffragettes of the time, while also showing the movement in full swing by concentrating on Sally and many other activists busy preparing banners for small as well as big marches attended by several suffrage societies. In this context, a special emphasis is placed on the notorious

"Black Friday" of 1910 and its aftermath. Like so many suffragettes, Sally ends up in prison after the Black Friday skirmishes with the police on Parliament Square. This is effectively represented in the graphic novel as the chaos of the Black Friday events is echoed in a panel structure leaving the ordered grid with Sally's individual experiences rendered in a sickly yellow as if everything happening to her were a bad dream. The ordered grid is restored with a twist only when Sally has to go to jail. The graphic novel highlights her ensuing confinement as well as her despair and the torture of being force-fed by translating these events into panels that mirror the bars of a prison cell while the pages all feature



Sally in Prison. © Reproduced with kind permission of the authors.

black borders to put emphasis on the harrowing experience that the convicted women had to go through, especially if they were not from the middle class.

The resultant intensifying suffragist militancy somehow liberates the women from their earlier gender roles, but this comes at a high price. Thus, Emily Davison's death in 1913 is related on a page of speechless, orderly panels bordered in black and partly consisting of newspaper cuttings. Sally, meanwhile, has also left the legal path by joining the YHB (Young Hot Bloods), the most militant arm of the WSPU, and is shown to take part in the arson attack on David Lloyd George's house. The panels depicting this act are drawn in dark blues and yellows to take up the notion of the bad dream again but also to highlight the importance of this event for Sally who comes to understand her own strength while also being doubtful about the costs of this kind of militancy.

The situation changes drastically with the outbreak of the First World War. It is introduced here in the form of re-workings of well-known war posters which show women keeping home and hearth safe while urging their menfolk to join the war. Interestingly enough, the graphic novel does not tell the story of how the women actually got the vote in 1918 but stops in 1916. At this moment, Sally wakes up in the nursing home, and it is 1969 again.

Sally's daughter, who is significantly called Sylvia, and her granddaughter, who has ginger hair like the young Sally herself, visit her in the nursing home. The panels include a wider variety of colours to announce that we have arrived in a different decade altogether. But the



Re-workings of WW1 Posters. © Reproduced

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ending is a far cry from asserting that everything is well now because Sally's granddaughter says that despite having turned 18 she cannot be bothered to vote (Talbot et al. 2014, 164). This puts Sally's hard-won achievements into question (also reflected by the third part ending in a confined space, while the two others showed Sally reclaiming public spaces for herself) and alludes to the fact that the women's movement had to be born anew in the late 1960s as all the early triumphs of the first wave seem to have been forgotten. The very last splash panel makes these triumphs visible again as it allows us one more glimpse at various suffragette memorabilia.

Sally Heathcote, Suffragette is not only a celebration of women's resilience and their readiness to confront danger

in order to achieve changes resulting in a more just society but also a reminder that younger generations of women tend to forget those females who fought before them. While the second wave of the feminist movement continued to conquer public spaces with their “Reclaim the Night” marches in the 1970s and 80s, today feminists still fight for safe spaces, digitally as well as in the real world. It seems as if there is still a long way to go before women will have finally reclaimed political, social and public spaces on equal terms with men despite having been able to exercise their right to vote for the last 100 years.

Endnotes

1 This quote from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who, together with her husband Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, was also an ardent supporter of the feminist cause and an editor of the WSPU’s first journal “Votes for Women”, is part of the epigraph of *Sally Heathcote, Suffragette* and taken from her autobiography (cf. Talbot et al. iii and 168).

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