



AQA A-Level History – Component 3: **Historical Investigation (non-exam assessment)**

Women's Rights in Britain (1897-1997)

Key Opposing Historiographical Arguments

About the author:

This Teacher CPD resource was created by Professor Krista Cowman, Head of the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. Professor Cowman's research has covered women's activism across a range of political organisations investigating the impact of a large militant suffrage campaign on the women's sections of political parties in Merseyside. She has also focussed on organizers in the militant suffrage society the Women's Social and Political Union, as well as the social history of the First World War, exploring British perceptions of living behind the lines on the Western Front.

Professor Cowman is currently involved in 2 research projects: Women's quotidian urban activism Britain c.1920-1990 and A (Socially Isolated) Room of One's Own: Women Writing Lockdown.

Historiographical Summary: The largest historiographical debate concerns the role of militancy in gaining the Parliamentary vote. This is very much a reflection of the source material with historians replicating the defensive position of militant and constitutionalist activists that can be found in the suffrage press (*Votes for Women* and *Common Cause* are now digitised and available online via British Library Newspaper Archive) and in participant's own histories and autobiographies. The relevance of WW1 is also key to much of this analysis.

A recent development in suffrage history (partly connected to the recent 2018 centenary) has been a burgeoning of local studies that take the focus away from the London-based leadership to look at campaigns in different nations and regions of the UK.

The history of the Women's Liberation Movement has only been approached much more recently. Here, oral histories are a key source although again these tend to replicate the divisions in the original movement between socialist and revolutionary feminism.

The School of History, Politics and International Relations

University of Leicester

University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH

T +44(0)116 252 2587

E hypir@le.ac.uk

The Character & Role of Militant Women's Suffrage (Pugh v Cowman)

Martin Pugh *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866 – 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Topic of argument: Pugh believes that militant tactics were ineffective and had little relevance to women winning the vote.

Summary of argument: Attempts to put militancy into a longer-context, partly as a way of downplaying its importance. Presents the WSPU as fragmenting and declining from 1912 and minimises extent of campaigning during the war years. Controversially, suggests that a natural trajectory for many militant suffragettes was a transition to the British Union of Fascists (a point repeated in his 2001 biography *The Pankhursts*).

How it differs from Cowman: Pugh's view of militancy is that it escalated from low-level to extremely violent, with one type replacing another. He argues that the WSPU was small, dominated by upper-middle and middle-class women, and that the work of the constitutional National Union of Suffrage Societies was more attractive to working-class women, and more important in women's achieving the vote. In this he is very much following a line set by Jill Liddington & Jill Norris in their *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (1978).

Krista Cowman "‘Incipient Toryism?’ The Women's Social and Political Union and the Independent Labour Party 1903-14' *History Workshop Journal* 53:1 (2002), pp. 128-148.

Topic of argument: Cowman argues that historians like Pugh have overlooked the continued appeal of the WSPU's militant suffrage to working-class and socialist women.

Summary of argument: Many studies of the Women's Social and Political Union have focussed on the leadership in London. Cowman's work looks at its activities at branch level, demonstrating that the decision of key leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and Theresa Billington Grieg to leave the Independent Labour Party in 1906, and the WSPU's subsequent prohibition on party-political activity by its members was not consistently followed in local branches. The article shows the WSPU to be a broader group, and one that did not abandon its working-class socialist roots as its middle-class membership grew

How it differs from Pugh: Looks at activism from the grass roots upwards to uncover links and connections that are not visible from looking at the leadership. Finds specific instances of branches ignoring the WSPU's prohibition on party activism to campaign simultaneously for suffrage and socialism such as Alice Morrissey who toured with the Socialist Clarion propaganda van while a militant WSPU activist.

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Nineteenth-Century Suffrage (Stanley v Smith)

Sandra Stanley, *Holton Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Topic of argument: A series of inter-connected individual biographies that demonstrates the breadth of interests of individuals involved in the suffrage campaign.

Summary of argument: Holton's work was pioneering in extending the range of activities that fed into the suffrage movement. The book lengthens the chronology by including figures such as Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Jessie Craigen, active in the nineteenth-century and Hannah Mitchell and Mary Gawthorpe, working-class socialist militant suffragettes. It also considers the role of men in the suffrage movement, particularly the involvement of gay activist Laurence Houseman, and looks in detail at suffrage during the war.

How it differs from Smith: Holton is much more focussed on individuals (and especially on less familiar individuals) and looks at the role of men as well as women, as well as the contribution of women like Jessie Craigen, affiliated to no organisation, to setting the ground for a mass suffrage campaign.

Harold Smith: *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866 – 1928* (Harlow: Longman, 1998).

Summary of Argument: Smith's contribution to the excellent Longman's Seminar Studies in History gives an overview of the campaign from the work of the Langham Place Group in supporting the petition John Stuart Mill presented to Parliament in 1866 to the contribution of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) to the equal franchise act of 1928. As with other books in this series, Smith provides an excellent selection of summary documents for students to analyse as well as a good summary of historiographical issues.

How it differs from Holton: Smith's book is much more focussed on organisations than on individuals. It offers a clear chronology of events, but is more interested in leadership and groups than on personal connections and friendships so is more of a top-down overview than a piece of detailed research.

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Women's Suffrage during the First World War and interwar period (Johnson v Law)

Alexandra Hughes Johnson, “Keep your eyes on us because there is no more napping!” The wartime Suffrage Campaigns of the Suffragettes of the WSPU and Independent WSPU’ in *The Politics of Women’s Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions* edited by Alexandra Hughes Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins, London: UCL Press, 2021, (pp. 129-160).

Topic of argument: Looks at the activity of two very under-studied dissident suffrage organisations during the First World War.

Summary of argument: In 1988, Liz Stanley and Ann Morely published *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison* in which they uncovered two forgotten organisations, The Suffragettes of the WSPU and the Independent Suffragettes. Both of these groups disagreed with Emmeline Pankhurst’s decision to stop suffrage campaigning on the outbreak of the First World War and challenged her continued use of the WSPU name. They argued that the name belonged to the membership rather than the leadership, and carried on working for suffrage during the war years. A small number of historians have made passing reference to these groups (for example in the wartime chapter of Krista Cowman’s study of paid organisers in the WSPU, *Women of the Right Spirit* (Manchester University Press, 2007). This chapter, based on Hughes-Johnson’s recent PhD, is the first sustained, comparative look at what suffragettes who disagreed with the Pankhurst’s approach to the war actually did.

How it differs from Law: Johnson looks at a group of women who wanted to stay in the WSPU and retain the WSPU’s name and legacy. Law does not really consider a suffrage campaign during the war, and does not recognise the areas Johnson has uncovered.

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Cheryl Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918 -1928* (New York: St martin's Press, 1997).

Topic of argument: Account of activity for the vote in the decade between partial and full suffrage.

Summary of argument: The majority of accounts of the British suffrage campaign stop in 1918 with the Representation of the People Act. Law looks at what campaigns took place up to the 1928 Act that gave women votes on the same terms as men. Law gives further detail on what suffragists as well as suffragettes did during the First World War before moving on to look at activity in and outside of parliament. As well as a focus on who was still pressing for equal votes, and what this looked like, she considers in detail some of the many laws passed in the first decade of women MPs, demonstrating that while the actual numbers of women in Parliament remained small, their influence went way beyond their numbers. A good companion piece to this is Pat Thane's article 'What Difference did the Vote Make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918', *Historical Research* 76, 192, 2003, pp. 268-285 which gives a broader overview of how women's lives changed as a result of the vote.

How it differs from Johnson: Law is more dismissive of the notion that there was suffrage campaigning during the First World War, but gives much more detail on what

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The “dip” in Feminist Activity (Beaumont v Spender)

Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

Topic of argument: Beaumont counters the popular view of a 'dip' in feminist activity between the so-called 'first' and 'second' waves.

Summary of argument: The 'wave' metaphor is a common way of describing feminist activity. Historians often speak of the 'first-wave' (roughly taken to span 1867-1928) and the 'second-wave' (1960s-80s) of the British feminist movement. Some scholars have challenged this (notably Dale Spender with her 1983 book: *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century*) but the view has proved tenacious. Beaumont's book challenges this in a different way. Her main point is that those looking for a continuity of feminist activism have largely been looking in the wrong place. This book looks at groups such as the Women's Institute, the Mother's Union and the Townswomen's Guild to argue that the inter-war decline of the women's movement has been hugely overrated.

How it differs from Spender: Text moves away from individual and arguably exceptional women to look at organisations previously not considered as either feminist or activist and explain how their campaigns fed into a wider agenda of increasing women's social and political rights throughout the century.

Dale Spender, *There's Always Been a Women's Movement this Century* (London: Pandora, 1983).

Topic of argument: What happened in the 'trough' between the peaks of first and second wave feminism.

Summary of argument: A series of short biographies of three feminists who were involved in the early women's movement and remained active in a number of public spheres (literature, philosophy, journalism, academia) where they continued to argue for feminist demands.

How it differs from Beaumont: Doesn't look at organisations, but at a rather loose coalition of fascinating women who did not necessarily operate as a group.

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Women's Liberation in the 1970s and 1980s (Further Reading)

Sue Bruley 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: A View from Some English Towns' *Women's History Review* 25, 5 (2016) 723-740.

B Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period? Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement' *Women's History Review* 22, 4 (2013) 643-657.

Margaretta Jolly *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement* Oxford University Press, 2019.

Topic of arguments: All recent summaries of some of the activities of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Summary of arguments of the three works: Writing the history of the women's suffrage movement is very much in its infancy. Bruley and Lockyer's articles both offer a flavour of what sort of activities were available, what demands were made, and what women got involved with these. Jolly's text is more detailed, but less accessible for non-specialists. There is also the website of 'Sisterhood and After' the oral history project that underpinned her book which is hosted on the British Library website and has lots of interesting materials and interviews.

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