

PROLOGUE

24 February 1909, London

Lady Constance Lytton picks at her food. Around her, the rest of the suffragettes are eating hungrily: this will be their last meal before they are arrested. These veterans are cheerful enough not to worry too much about their upcoming ordeal. They've done this many times before.

This is Constance's first protest. She is almost forty years old and has spent the afternoon lying in the dark with a headache. She has come in disguise, with her hair arranged differently than usual. She is worried the police will consider her an 'awkward customer' because her well-known family might kick up a fuss – as well they might.

Elsa Gye has been assigned to keep an eye on Constance. New recruits are often very nervous, and as Constance pushes her dinner around her plate, Elsa can see how troubled she is. Elsa is only in her twenties but is already a seasoned campaigner. Constance feels terribly guilty that this nice young woman will have to accompany her to prison. Constance is wearing a white muff and feather boa. She is told, gently and kindly, to leave them behind or they will be torn to shreds.

The women assemble at Caxton Hall, putting on their 'Votes for Women' sashes as if they were battledress. Always disorganised, Constance has forgotten her ticket to get in and has to rush back

to get it. The sense of anticipation hardens into determination and dread. There are speeches but Constance can hardly hear them. Instead she nervously asks Elsa what she needs to do.

‘You needn’t bother about what you’ll do,’ Elsa says matter-of-factly. ‘It will all be done to you. There is only one thing you must remember. It is our business to go forward. Whatever is said to you and whatever is done to you, you must on no account be turned back.’

In theory, the goal of tonight’s protest is to march to the House of Commons and present a petition to the Prime Minister. But all the women know their mission is hopeless as they will inevitably be stopped and arrested. Constance is secretly glad about this. She is almost more afraid of success. What on earth would she say to the Prime Minister if she actually met him face to face?

The women have barely set foot in the street before the police close in. Constance has little sense of direction and clings desperately to Elsa. Nothing in Constance’s genteel upbringing has prepared her for the jostling and jeering of a hostile mob. She can hardly breathe. The suffragettes break away from their neat lines and begin running through the side streets of Westminster. Constance is pushed and pulled in all directions and falls to the floor several times. She is picked up, manhandled and thrown to the floor by a policeman. Elsa is out of sight. Constance is desperate and tells another woman, ‘I can’t go on. I simply can’t go on.’

‘You will be all right presently,’ is her answer. It’s enough reassurance to pick herself up and try again. The dark evening is lit up again and again by the flash of press photographers.

Eventually Constance makes it as far as the gates at the entrance to the Palace of Westminster. A policeman takes her by the arm and steers her away. Exhausted and confused, she follows him obediently. It’s not till they arrive at a police station that Constance

realises she has been arrested. She is oddly relieved. At least she is out of the scrum and cannot be hurt any more.

In the police station, Constance is reunited with her comrades, who are covered in scrapes and bruises and blood. The leader of that night's work, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, is greeted as a heroine. For the first time, Constance tastes something of the rewards of being a suffragette: the friendship, the solidarity and the delight in each other's achievements. She has never felt useful in her life until now. She is part of something at last.

Her only regret is for her mother, and the shame Lady Lytton will feel in the morning as she unfolds the newspaper and sees the family's illustrious name being dragged through the mud. The day before the protest, Constance had written to her mother in an attempt to explain the inexplicable: why a gentle and delicate lady of leisure should throw her lot in with the militant suffragettes.

'Prisons, as you know, have been my hobby,' is the best she can do. Constance's hobby is about to become a full-time occupation.¹



18 January 1910, Liverpool Gaol

Jane Warton hears hurried footsteps outside her cell. The doctor is coming.

The door opens and he appears, trailed by a series of wardresses. Jane has decided not to resist and lies down obediently on the wooden bed. But the staff are taking no chances. One wardress grips her head and another pins her feet down.

'There's a choice. A wooden gag or a steel one. The steel one hurts.'

The doctor explains in detail just how much it hurts. Jane ignores him. Defiance, an absolute refusal to comply in any way, is part of her resistance strategy. Eventually, and it is hard to imagine

he doesn't take some pleasure in this choice, he selects the steel gag. He begins screwing her mouth open. It pries her jaws apart, much wider than a mouth would normally stretch, into a gaping silent scream.

Then the doctor pushes a four-foot long tube into her mouth and down into her stomach. He pours the 'food' – a white slop of milk, egg and brandy – down a funnel. Jane's stomach automatically revolts and she is sick. Her body convulses, head straining forward, knees going automatically to her chest. But the wardresses hold her down tighter so she can't struggle. The food is simultaneously going down and coming up. It seems never-ending. Eventually Jane forgets who she is. She forgets why she is there. She forgets everything but the pain and the sensation of simultaneously being choked and suffocated.

After the doctor has finished, he slaps her in the face.

Jane lies gasping on her cell floor. The wardresses try to comfort her, but she cannot move. She is covered with sick. It is in her clothes, through her hair and even across the cell on her bed. The wardresses say it is too late in the day to get her washed and changed. She will have to stay like that all night. Despite the squalor, Jane feels only relief that the torment is over: she can breathe again without the suffocating tube.

Jane listens through the wall as her neighbour, Elsie, is force-fed in turn. It's almost worse than being tortured herself. When all is quiet next door, Jane bangs on the wall and screams 'No surrender!' into the silence. 'No surrender,' Elsie echoes back through the brick wall.

The next day, Jane decides to make a last desperate protest at her treatment before she becomes too weak to act. She takes her shoes off and uses them to smash the gas jet that heats her cell. Glass shatters all around her. The wardresses sent to clean up are frightened of this dangerous, raving woman. They take her shoes away before she can do any more damage.

Then the doctor returns.²

Later, Jane will try to find the words to talk about what happened. But she can't. 'The horror of it was more than I can describe.'³



This is the story of how Lady Constance Lytton became Jane Warton.

Over the course of 1909, Constance turned herself from a respectable spinster into a die-hard suffragette. It meant rejecting her upbringing, abandoning her class and defying her mother. She did it all without hesitation and with barely a backward glance at her former life.

Her life until then had given no hint of the rebellion to come. She was often ill and always cripplingly shy. She was devoted to her mother, her siblings and their families. Her spare time was spent in clumsy but well-intentioned efforts to help the working women who lived around the family estate. She had little interest in politics and even less in voting.

Today, it is all too easy to see the suffragette victory as inevitable, a natural and logical development in a society becoming ever more liberal and progressive. But when Constance Lytton joined the suffragettes in 1909, there was nothing inevitable about it. Since Emmeline Pankhurst had set up the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, the decades-old struggle for the vote had gained new force and momentum. But after six years of exhausting campaigning, the sense of optimism and vigour was draining away. There was no end in sight. The women were tired of signing petitions, marching on parades and even going to prison when none of it seemed to have any effect. The Liberal government, led by Herbert Asquith, had no interest in 'votes for women', and were grimly set on ignoring these women, however loud and aggressive they became.

To break the deadlock, the suffragettes needed more effective weapons. Almost by chance, they hit upon a deadly solution: the hunger strike. The battle between the government and the suffragettes now entered a new and perilous phase, in which the women risked their lives every time they were arrested. Why on earth would Lady Constance Lytton join them?



We think we know the suffragettes. We have mental images of them, smartly dressed Edwardian ladies chaining themselves to railings and setting fire to postboxes. We've absorbed them into our culture and our history. In a measure of how iconic the suffragettes have become, Danny Boyle brought them to life in the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony – and there they were, alongside Shakespeare, the Industrial Revolution and the NHS, defining modern Britain.

The trouble with this stereotype is that it obscures the real women who were involved: women who gave up their time, their energy and in some cases their lives for the idea that they were worth something and they should be counted. For daring to stand up for themselves, they were heckled and ridiculed. For daring to keep trying, in the face of government indifference, public condemnation and even police brutality, they were imprisoned. Even today, they are sometimes dismissed and belittled as well-off single women who had nothing else to do. There are even those – historians as well as contemporaries – who claim that their focus on women and gender was a distraction which took the focus off the 'real' problems facing the nation: class, inequality and poverty. But it's not easy to change the world unless you first are allowed into it, and the suffragettes broke down the barriers that had kept women out for centuries. In doing so, they did not just win the vote: they also changed how women were seen by men, and how women saw

themselves. The suffragettes helped women become a force to be reckoned with, politically, socially and culturally.

When it comes to the suffragette movement, biography has a great deal to add to traditional history. It allows us to understand the complexity and the rich diversity of the suffragette movement that is hidden by the image of the Edwardian lady gone wild. Every suffragette was different and was drawn into the movement for different and very personal reasons. Some were steeped in the labour movement and became disillusioned with a socialism that didn't recognise the specific problems women faced. Some saw it as a natural progression after women had taken their first tentative steps into higher education, medicine and other professions. Some believed it was the only way to address the grinding poverty of women in the slums and inner cities. Some wanted recognition that women were equal to men. Others believed that women were different from men and that this very difference meant their voices should be heard and their views acknowledged. Some even wanted suffrage simply because they couldn't vote and their butler could.

It's by remembering and re-telling their stories that we do these women justice. They made acts of extraordinary acts of bravery and heroism part of their everyday routine. But Constance Lytton's story is exceptional, even by suffragette standards. No less a person than Emmeline Pankhurst claims that 'Constance Lytton did one of the most heroic deeds to be recorded in the history of the movement'.⁴ She was loved and admired by the suffragettes, almost as much as the Pankhursts themselves. After she died in 1923 one of her suffragette sisters said, 'If someone could write the story of that spiritual pilgrimage, showing the atmosphere of the home where it started, and the contemporary current of thought among women that led Con out of that shelter into Jane Warton's cell, a great deal that cannot be understood now would be made clear.' No one has yet done so.

This is partly because Lady Constance Lytton is so different from the others. Her story is not a 'typical' story of a suffragette, and not only because there was no such thing as a 'typical' suffragette. It is also partly because Constance remained utterly loyal to Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst, even as many of their followers deserted them. Though history is supposedly written by the victors, many historical accounts of the Pankhursts have been critical of their leadership, and their followers have suffered by extension. More recently, historians have been keen to shift the focus away from the Pankhursts, and they are right to do so. The vote wasn't won by just two women, however determined they may have been. The emphasis has been on restoring working-class women to the picture, but important as that is, it has left even less room for the anomalous stories of the upper-class suffragettes. However, as the centennial anniversary of women winning the vote approaches, and we reflect on the suffragettes' achievement and their legacy, it's time that this exceptional woman and her extraordinary story became better known. Though these events took place a hundred years ago, they still have resonance and parallels today. Think, for example, of the misogynistic vitriol and hate directed at many women who dare to have a voice and express an opinion in public. The suffragettes would find that all too familiar. We've not come as far as we'd like to think.



This is a conventional biography, in that it begins at the beginning and continues on to the end, but Constance is not a conventional subject. She packed all the action and incident of her public life (though not her inner, emotional life) into a few short years. It seemed only right to reflect that when writing her biography. That makes this book a more uneven shape than a traditional biography,

as it canters through the first forty years of her life and then slows right down to explore those turbulent months in detail – but, after all, whose life is as neat and linear as a traditional biography would have us believe?

Biographers are always faced with the conundrum of what to call their subjects. It's a uniquely unbalanced relationship. We think we know them. We spend our waking hours poring over their letters and poking into their secrets. But of course we hardly know them at all. Biographers of women have an added consideration. Male subjects are almost always called by their surname, whereas women are usually called by their first name: an unconscious reflex, perhaps, demonstrating that men are approached with respect and women with familiarity. In this case, as many Lyttons will appear, it would be confusing as well as jarring to use the surname. The same is true of the Pankhursts, and in the end, I have chosen to use the first names of most of the people who appear in these pages.

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* calls her Lady Constance Bulwer-Lytton, but no one else, at the time or subsequently, uses the prefix Bulwer. No one called her Constance either. She was Conny or Con to her siblings and Lady Con among the suffragettes. That seemed too familiar for me though it would be tedious to continuously refer to 'Lady' Constance. I have compromised in using Constance.

Unlike many biographers, I have not struggled with a lack of material. But it is important to note that the material I have had has been carefully edited. Constance told her own version of her story in her autobiography, *Prisons and Prisoners*. Her early life is dispatched in just a few pages and her 'real' life does not begin until she becomes a suffragette. She appears as an accidental heroine, hopelessly naive but enlightened and saved by the Pankhursts. *Prisons and Prisoners* is astonishingly religious in tone. It is a spiritual quest as much as an autobiography and reads almost as though it

has been written to be declaimed from a pulpit. There is a powerful moment during one of Constance's stays in prison when Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence recites one of Olive Schreiner's stories and it gives the women new strength. *Prisons and Prisoners* is likewise written to give the suffragettes new strength at a moment, in 1914, when increasingly audacious and violent attacks on private property had alienated public opinion. It expresses the fierce longings of a woman forced to leave the battle but desperate to rejoin it.

Constance's family, led by her sister Betty Balfour, told another story when they printed her letters. They wanted to present a picture which fitted with the family image of 'Con' as dutiful daughter and sacrificial lamb: Francis of Assisi in female form. In these letters, we also see clearly the struggles of a family who loved Constance and did as much as they could to support her but couldn't understand her. The letters aren't entirely sanitised, and Betty sometimes makes surprisingly modern editorial choices for a book published in the 1920s: for example, in the published letters, Constance speaks frankly about her dislike of her famous grandfather; her depression; and even her impulse to kill herself. However, Betty also left out a great deal. There is no mention, for example, of the unhappy love affair that coloured a decade of Constance's life. This family story of duty and sacrifice was reinforced in later Lytton writing, including in her sister Emily's collection of letters and her brother Neville's memoir. But this was by no means the whole picture. This biography therefore draws heavily on letters which were left out of the published collection and have not appeared in print before.

The suffragettes, too, had their own version of Constance's life. This was a society deeply riven by class, and when Constance reached across the divide they responded with genuine love and admiration. But many of them were also slightly dazzled by her privilege, and this comes across in the way they talk about her, their aristocratic martyr. Constance does appear in histories of the

suffrage movement, but just briefly. The focus is usually on two key moments in her life: her decision to join the suffragettes and her decision to become 'Jane Warton'. This book explores what it was in her personality, her circumstances and her history that influenced those decisions, and argues there was much more to Constance Lytton than Jane Warton.

The two stories of Constance Lytton's life are so contradictory that they almost seem to belong to two different people. But they are both correct, and both important to Constance's own identity and sense of self. She was both utterly loyal to her family and totally committed to the suffragettes, and to emphasise one over the other is to do her a disservice. I have done my best to tell both stories at once and, wherever possible, I have let her speak for herself.