

Catherine Osler

1854-1924

By Jim Wells

At a recent exhibition titled 'Women Power Protest' there was a striking portrait of Catherine Osler, one of the key leaders in the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS). Given how few portraits there are of Birmingham's female political figures from that era in the collection, it felt worthwhile to investigate the story behind the portrait.

Catherine's political activism started at an early age. At the age of fourteen she became a subscriber to the BWSS. This was the start of a lifelong commitment to campaigning for female suffrage. To understand this early involvement, we need to look at Catherine's family situation and the wider Birmingham context. Her parents, William and Caroline Taylor, were founder members of the BWSS when it was set up in 1868, and Caroline became treasurer in 1871. The Taylor family were a Non-Conformist family of the Unitarian Church, the same as the Chamberlains, and involved in the liberal causes of the day. They were well-off and very much part of Edgbaston society, sharing similar business and political interests with other families in the Birmingham suburb. From an early age Catherine would have seen strong female role models in her immediate circle. Her own mother was politically active and she would have seen Eliza Sturge (see article on education) speaking at the Town Hall rallies. It is of course important to note that at the time, due to prevailing attitude, this was outside the norm in what was an almost exclusively male political world. On a contemporary note, Birmingham has still only ever had one female political Council Leader up to the present day.

As a young adult, Catherine would have been part of Birmingham's high point of a civil culture imbued with radical liberal politics and values. Attending her Unitarian Chapel, she would have heard one of the architects of the civic gospel, Richard Crosskey, preaching on the importance of holding public office as a way to further the cause of social improvement, which included women's suffrage. From both this family and broader cultural context, Catherine started to develop her public role and strong commitment to women's suffrage in particular. In 1881 she founded the Birmingham Ladies Debating Society and in 1884 she became the Secretary of the BWSS. Her sister was Treasurer. At a Town Hall meeting on women's suffrage, she spoke about: *'the indifference which was evinced by the general public and Members of Parliament towards the Women's Suffrage Movement'*, a frustration that was to dominate much of her political life. Having served her apprenticeship we can now see Catherine taking a leading public role in both the Liberal Party and the BWSS, two commitments which, later on, would come into conflict.

In the 1890s the BWSS continued to campaign and to focus on the local in the absence of a strong national lead, with national splits reflecting the controversies over Home Rule for Ireland. Catherine, unlike the majority of Birmingham Liberals, remained a supporter of Gladstone and Home Rule. Despite this she stayed on good terms across what became an increasingly bitter political divide. The



'Portrait of Catherine Osler' by local artist Edward Samuel Harper and the inspiration for this article.

most significant change in this late Victorian era was the BWSS leadership becoming entirely female. At a meeting of the BWSS in 1893, Catherine urged female members that: *'they must not look to men to win their freedom for them, they must fight their battles for themselves'*, a bold and radical statement for the times.

Coming into the Edwardian period we find Catherine as President of the BWSS in 1902, with the organisation playing an active role in traditional liberal circles and using constitutional methods. Debates, leaflets and deputations to Parliament were the heart of the day-to-day programme, which very much operated in an almost exclusively middle class milieu. This began to change with a concerted attempt by the leadership to reach out to working class women in the City. By today's standards some of that work would seem quite patronising, but in some aspects such as Mary McCarthy's work with the Cradley chain makers, it combined the campaign for the vote with improving conditions for working women. Along with this political change came a desire to understand the situation of working class women in more depth, and the result was a remarkable piece of early sociological research called *Working Women's Work and Wages*, carried out between 1904-1907. The authors were Edward Cadbury, Cecile Matheson and George Shann, and the level of detail along with the amount of research carried out is impressive. The full copy of the text is available on Internetarchive.org and is well worth a browse.

We now come to a period which is probably the most well known in the fight for women's suffrage - the years leading up to the First World War in August 1914. Birmingham reflected the national scene with a branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the longstanding BWSS. Both organisations had the same aim of women's suffrage, but had very different approaches and tactics to achieving that aim. The BWSS was affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), led by Millicent Fawcett. Fawcett had become a firm friend of Catherine's, despite their differing opinions over the Home Rule for Ireland. How did Catherine, a lifelong supporter of women's suffrage, steer through this controversial time? Given her religious affiliations, attachment to liberal values and constitutional methods it is no surprise that she did not join the WSPU or endorse their methods, although she certainly understood the reason for their militancy. This is illustrated in a letter to the *Spectator* in June 1906, a journal firmly opposed to female suffrage: *'yet when after a long peaceful agitation and a superior patience to that shown by other classes, some women are at least betraying exasperation at the obstinate refusal of their just demands, an argument is often deduced from their loss of self control against fitness for citizenship'*. Catherine would, of course, have known many of those women who felt it was time to take a more militant stand as they often came from the same Edgbaston circles.

Throughout this period Catherine trod a difficult path. Whilst maintaining her belief in constitutional action, she was frustrated by some of the actions of the WSPU, such as arson attacks, which in her view damaged the case for female suffrage. At the same time, she vigorously condemned the government for its appalling treatment of suffragette prisoners and resigned from the Liberal party and the senior positions she held in the organisation. Some of the issues can be seen at the famous Asquith meeting at Bingley Hall in September 1909, which came under attack from WSPU militants, frustrated by Asquith's complete refusal to discuss the issue. Catherine, who was still a member of the Liberal Party at this time, attended but refused to sign in as men were not required to, and we assume, along with the other women present, refused to stand or applaud Asquith. Catherine's actions were consistent with her general approach but others felt it was a betrayal to attend.

In 1912 there was a major shift in Catherine's political position as a result of the Labour Party supporting the case for women's suffrage. The NUWSS set up an election fund to support those candidates and Parties that were in favour of women's suffrage, which in most cases meant

supporting Labour Party candidates. Many local NUWSS groups did not support the national policy but Catherine and the BWSS did, a big change for someone who had been a lifelong member of the Liberal party, holding senior positions in the organisation.

The period leading up to the First World War was dominated by the WSPU militant and radical campaign which mobilised many women across the country, led by the Pankhursts. Many activists received terrible treatment in prison with force feeding leaving them suffering with ill health for the rest of their lifetime. With the outbreak of war in August 1914 the WSPU disbanded and became strongly pro-war in outlook and actions. Catherine and the BWSS offered their support to the Civil Authorities and, at a national level, the NUWSS was split between those who were pro-war and those with a more pacifist persuasion due to religious or political convictions. The war changed everything in regard to the view of women and women's suffrage so that, by 1917, a partial extension of suffrage was on offer to women. How did Catherine and the BWSS respond to the White Paper, when it was a long way short of their goal of parity with men? The proposal gave only forty percent of women the vote and, amongst other elements, restricted the vote to women over 30 – excluding the very young women who, in Birmingham, had been the heart of the munitions industry. At a special meeting on 7th March 1917, at the Birmingham & Midland Institute, the BWSS and NUWSS agreed to give the legislation qualified support on the basis that it was a move in the right direction. Catherine understood that this was not the time to give up the campaign and, at the BWSS AGM on 29th June 1917, she made the following comment: *'notwithstanding the encouragement they had received there must be no unbuckling of their armour or laying down the peaceful sword of their spirit'*.

The legislation came into force on 6th January 1918, but it was not until 1928 that women were granted the vote on the same basis as men, which had been the original aim of the BWSS when it was set up in 1868. This article has obviously been written from the perspective of understanding Catherine and her role in the campaign for female suffrage, but this is not to ignore the huge sacrifice made by those who took different routes with the WSPU, such as Bertha Ryland who suffered terrible conditions in prison for her beliefs. Their stories, along with Catherine's, are told in Nicola Gauld's excellent book (see below), for which much of the material along with other sources has formed the basis of this article.

Returning to Catherine, in 1918 the BWSS merged with the local branch of the National Union of Women Workers and Catherine was initially President but retired a year later. In July 1919 she was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Birmingham, and it was at this point that the wonderful portrait which inspired this article was undertaken by Edward Harper. Catherine died in 1924 at the age of 70, some four years before the complete achievement of her aims. The last words are from a BWSS report: *'Only those who have worked with and under her (Catherine) can justly appreciate the patience, wisdom, courage and unselfish devotion she has put into the work for the cause of the enfranchisement of women, and for the general raising of the standard and welfare of all women'*.

Further reading

Nicola Gauld, *'Words and Deeds'*, West Midlands History, 2018

George J. Barnsby, *'Birmingham Working People; A History of the Labour Movement in Birmingham 1650-1914'*, Integrated Publishing Services, 1989

<https://archive.org/> 'Working Women's work and wages'

<https://archive.org/details/womensworkwagesp00cadbrich>

Illustrations from Birmingham Museums Trust's digital archive

The two banners below represent the different traditions active in Birmingham: the first is a banner for the West Midland Federation of Suffrage Societies, of which the BWSS and Catherine would have been part. The second is from the suffragette tradition of the WSPU - lead nationally by the Pankhursts and very active in Birmingham.



1981F15: Suffragist Banner - West Midland Federation, 1912.

A Shield-shaped banner, with the central figure of Justice. Applied, painted, edged with metallic braid and backed with white twill cotton.

1988F1690:
Suffragette Banner -
Birmingham: Justice &
Liberty, 1910-1920.
Showing the skyline of
Birmingham with the city's
coat of arms surrounded
by laurel leaves.



1996V148.126

Engraving - Midland Institute, Birmingham
Wilkinson Collection, Vol I.

This is the Birmingham and Midland Institute (BMI)'s original building, in Paradise Street, where the BWSS had many of its key meetings including the one to protest at Asquith's meeting at Bingley Hall, and the meeting in 1917 at which was agreed to give qualified support to the White Paper on female suffrage. Catherine would have been a regular attender and speaker at the venue. The building, along with much of Birmingham's Victorian heritage, was demolished in the 1960s and the BMI is now based in what was originally a private Birmingham Library in Margaret Street, built in 1898/99, designed by F. Barry Peacock.

