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Scheopner, Erin Kate. 2020. 'A double claim to be consulted': the Pankhurst sisters' newspaper coverage of Ireland, 1912–18. *Women's History Review*, 29(7), pp. 1182-1200. ISSN 0961-2025 [Article]

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Title: 'A double claim to be consulted': The Pankhurst Sisters' Newspaper Coverage of Ireland, 1912-18

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Word Count: 9,951

### Biography:

Erin Scheopner is an Associate Lecturer in the Department of History at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her interdisciplinary research explores the relationship between media and politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is particularly interested in the formation and evolution of national questions and how those are articulated and covered by the news media. Her thesis and upcoming monograph, *'Miserable conflict and confusion': The Irish Question in British Newspapers, 1917-21*, examines British national press coverage of Ireland from the aftermath of the Easter Rising to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

## **‘A double claim’: The Pankhurst Sisters’ Newspaper Coverage of Ireland, 1912-18**

The Irish question and women’s suffrage were two noteworthy topics of debate in Britain and Ireland in the period surrounding the Great War. Both questions challenged British constitutional politics, split opinion, and prompted newspaper coverage. This article is interested in the debates as they occurred in Britain. Through a case study of two British suffrage newspapers, *The Suffragette/Britannia* (1912-18) and *The Woman’s Dreadnought/The Workers’ Dreadnought* (1914-24), edited respectively by Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, this article investigates how British suffrage press reported on Ireland. It asks: how did British suffrage press coverage of the Irish question develop throughout 1912-18? It argues *The Suffragette/Britannia* and *The Woman’s Dreadnought/The Workers’ Dreadnought* are useful representations of the Pankhurst sisters’ diverging political opinion, which also evoked wider women’s suffrage themes, and how the Great War and immediate post-war period shaped and interacted with the competing political priorities of women’s suffrage and the Irish question.

Keywords: WWI, Anglo-Irish, Suffrage, British newspapers, Pankhurst, Irish question, Home Rule

### **Introduction**

In the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War, debates over two leading national and political questions of the day entangled Britain and Ireland: the Irish question and women’s suffrage. Both questions challenged British constitutional politics, split opinion, and were consistent topics of debate in the news media.

Consequently, the issues of Ireland and women’s suffrage competed for public and parliamentary attention as Britain and Ireland navigated a world war.

Many scholarly studies have assessed Anglo-Irish relations and have explored the political priorities of the British government during the period analysed, 1912-18. Such considerations feature in works of D.G. Boyce’s *Englishmen and Irish Troubles*,

which examines the influence of British public opinion on the British government's Irish policy, Ronan Fanning's *Fatal Path*, which offers a case study of high politics in Anglo-Irish relations, and Nicholas Mansergh's *The Irish Question*, which explores the failure of the British government to resolve the Irish question prior to 1921.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, some studies have drawn connections between the two topics, including how British and Irish feminists came into contact with one another and how the political circumstances in each country impacted priorities and behaviours. Senia Pařeta has explored these connections on a number of occasions, including in a recent lecture focused on how the British women's suffrage movement was shaped by the Irish question.<sup>2</sup> Other studies include Mo Moulton's 'You Have Votes and Power', which investigates the efforts of British women to support Irish self-determination throughout 1919-23, Margaret Ward's 'Conflicting Interests', which explores the impact of Britain's imperial role on the suffrage movements in both Britain and Ireland, and Vivien Kelly's 'Irish Suffragettes at the Time of the Home Rule Crisis', which considers exchanges between Irish and British suffrage groups in Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Yet more can be uncovered and analysed from these exchanges. This is especially true when considering the different sects of opinion within both topics in the period surrounding the Great War. As Pařeta appropriately warns, scholars need to carefully recognise the Irish and British suffrage movements beyond disagreements to avoid the risk of oversimplifying the issue.<sup>4</sup> The same logic is applicable to debates of the Irish question too. When taking this into consideration and applying it to the work of the Pankhurst sisters' newspapers (for which they were editors), one can observe different levels of interaction within and between the respective suffrage movements in Britain and Ireland. The sisters' divergence in their political leanings evoked wider women's suffrage themes: Christabel, a member of the militant Women's Social and

Political Union (WSPU), focused on the subordinate status of women in Edwardian society whereas Sylvia, a socialist feminist, viewed women's suffrage as part of a wider project of equality and involved herself in various campaigns for social change.<sup>5</sup> This split in priority manifested with how the sisters and their newspapers reported on Ireland and the Irish question. Therefore, *The Suffragette/Britannia* and *The Woman's Dreadnought/The Workers' Dreadnought* provide a unique case study for British suffrage coverage of the debates on the Irish question.

Such an analysis of how *The Suffragette/Britannia* and *The Woman's Dreadnought/The Workers' Dreadnought* reported and editorialised Ireland is important because there was significant crossover in the discourse on suffrage and the Irish question during the First World War. And the Great War provided women of varying political beliefs and backgrounds with the opportunity to engage with social and political concerns.<sup>6</sup> Although the women's suffrage movement's response to the outbreak of the war varied greatly, the movement interacted with, influenced, and was influenced by the other political questions of the day, including Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, responses to both the Irish question and women's suffrage were decided at Westminster but were contested in public spheres like the burgeoning trade of the press, making the Pankhurst newspapers an effective tool for considering British women's suffrage understanding of the Irish question and offering insight into the thoughts and priorities of the day. We cannot appreciate how the British public and politicians might have responded to press accounts of the intersecting questions of Ireland and suffrage unless we clearly define what it was the press was putting forward

to them. This includes insight from how some of those impacted by the debates viewed these political concerns.

Therefore, this study seeks to add to the existing body of research by critically analysing the outputs of the Pankhurst sisters' newspapers and asking how did British suffrage press coverage of the Irish question develop throughout 1912-18? This is in order to address a gap in the historiography: how the British suffrage press reported the Irish question in the period surrounding the Great War and leading to the passage of the Representation of the People Act. It argues the respective newspapers are useful representations of the Pankhurst sisters' diverging political opinion, which also evoked wider women's suffrage themes, and how the Great War and immediate post-war period shaped and interacted with the competing political priorities of women's suffrage and the Irish question.

### **Terminology: The Irish Question and Women's Suffrage**

Following the 1800 Act of Union, which formally joined Great Britain and Ireland as the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland', the political significance of the Irish question surfaced, splitting opinion in both Britain and Ireland. Most notably, political opinion largely divided between those who supported union with Britain (unionists) and those who opposed it to varying degrees (nationalists).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, at the heart of the Irish question debate was Ireland's constitutional relationship with Britain and what sort of position it should occupy (if any) within the United Kingdom.

Starting in the 1870s, debates on self-government via Home Rule began as a possible solution to the Irish question. It called for the establishment of an Irish parliament with control over Irish affairs to work alongside the imperial parliament of Westminster. But

Conservatives and Liberals attacked the proposal fearing it threatened the union and empire.<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Gladstone's initial proposal for Home Rule was rejected in the House of Commons in 1886 and a second proposal was defeated in the House of Lords in 1893.<sup>10</sup> And the Liberal party in Britain split and those opposed to Home Rule worked with the Conservatives under a single 'Unionist' banner. This included many suffragists, who were initially aligned with the Liberal party but were sent into the Unionist fold (although most pro-suffrage radicals remained loyal to Gladstone).<sup>11</sup> Liberal women who remained loyal to Gladstone's campaign focused on the social and humanitarian aspects of the Irish question to draw in women's support for the Home Rule solution.<sup>12</sup>

The women's suffrage movement in Britain launched and gained momentum around the same time as the Home Rule debates. The first women's suffrage petition presented at Westminster occurred in 1832 and in 1894 the Local Government Act passed, allowing women the right to vote in elections for county and borough councils.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, the movement expanded and organised under the leadership of groups like the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), founded in 1897, and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in 1903 at the home of Emmeline Pankhurst.<sup>14</sup> The WSPU is considered the first organisation to have 'militancy' as a political policy (first employed in campaigning prior to the 1906 general election).<sup>15</sup> Militancy was a visible and controversial form of protest that evolved from disobedience only to an aggressive stance against the government with the purpose of securing the demand of votes for women.<sup>16</sup> As the WSPU extended its acts of civil disobedience, divisions between it and groups like the NUWSS expanded.<sup>17</sup> A 'suffragist' was anyone involved in the fight for the right to vote, whereas a 'suffragette' was a radical, militant member of the suffrage movement.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is important to note that there was crossover between the activities of organisations. Militants participated

in parliamentary lobbying and constitutionalists assisted with organising demonstrations.<sup>19</sup>

In Ireland, Isabella Tod established one of the first suffrage societies in Belfast in 1873, the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society.<sup>20</sup> Shortly thereafter, several suffrage groups established throughout Ireland with the intent to promote and support the cause of women's suffrage.<sup>21</sup> Many of these societies were not exclusive to securing the franchise but also blended suffragist ideologies with other interests such as education, philanthropy, and the Ladies' Land League.<sup>22</sup> And the Irish political situation and the influence of religion and familial support are important factors to differentiate the Irish women's suffrage experience from that of their British counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Yet these suffrage societies did share important links and influences with their English counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Ideas were exchanged through visits by English suffragists to Ireland and via Irish suffragists reading British suffrage press.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the women's suffrage movements in Britain and Ireland often interacted with and were influenced by one another.

### **The Pankhurst Sisters' Newspapers**

The Pankhurst family is deeply associated with the campaign for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. Emmeline Goulden and Richard Pankhurst, who married in 1879, shared a passion for challenging injustices, which they passed down to their children including Christabel Harriette, born in 1880, and Estelle Sylvia, born in 1882.<sup>26</sup> Emmeline's involvement in women's suffrage began in 1880 and by 1903 she became a founding member of the WSPU.<sup>27</sup> Daughters Christabel and Sylvia joined in the WSPUs activities, but while their support for some causes paralleled, such as securing the vote, their political differences outweighed their similarities.<sup>28</sup> In 1913, Sylvia created the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), which, though an affiliate of the WSPU, differed in a number of



important ways.<sup>29</sup> The group blended Sylvia's feminist agenda with the fight for social reform for the working classes (primarily in East London).<sup>30</sup> The familial divisions eventually led Emmeline and Christabel to expel Sylvia and the ELFS from the WSPU in early 1914.<sup>31</sup> This expulsion was at least partly to do with Sylvia's connection with the causes of Irish republican and socialist leader James Connolly, including sharing the stage at an event in support of the 1913 Dublin Lockout (an industrial dispute between workers and employers in Dublin).<sup>32</sup>

The political leanings of Christabel and Sylvia are well represented through their editorship of their respective newspapers. In October 1912, *The Suffragette* began publication under the editorship of Christabel and was made the official organ of the WSPU.<sup>33</sup> The paper was founded in secret as a result of a split in the WSPU leadership, replacing *Votes for Women*.<sup>34</sup> The paper ran under the name *The Suffragette* from 1912-15, changing to *Britannia* in 1915 until the paper's end in 1918 (with 271 issues total).<sup>35</sup> In March 1914, *The Woman's Dreadnought* began publication under the editorship of Sylvia as the official organ of the ELFS.<sup>36</sup> The paper campaigned equally for feminist and socialist activities.<sup>37</sup> It ran under the name *The Woman's Dreadnought* from 1914-17, changing to *The Workers' Dreadnought* in 1917 until the paper's end in 1924 (with 531 issues total).<sup>38</sup> Both of these newspapers were at times impacted by the restraints of the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A.), an act designed to help prevent invasion and keep morale in Britain high.<sup>39</sup>

Circulation totals for each newspaper are difficult to obtain. Neither paper was considered part of the national press with a national readership but were instead targeted publications. Revenue figures from each is also a challenge. During publication, *The Woman's Dreadnought* was sold for a half-penny in the first four days and was then distributed free of charge throughout East London.<sup>40</sup> It is estimated that the paper began

printing around 20,000 copies a week, which individual members then sold.<sup>41</sup> Although not a large distribution, *The Woman's Dreadnought* was taken seriously in left-wing circles and continues to be considered an important feminist/socialist publication.<sup>42</sup> By comparison, *The Suffragette* is arguably the most iconic of all British women's suffrage newspapers and is credited with reclaiming the term 'suffragette', which had garnered negative connotations in political circles and the popular press in Britain.<sup>43</sup> Yet by the time the paper transitioned to *Britannia* in 1915 the circulation was marginal (due in part to the fractured nature of the women's suffrage movement and the split opinion in the movement regarding war).<sup>44</sup> However, subscription to the WSPU remained substantial and the paper made important use of its advertising pages.<sup>45</sup>

As with any newspaper study, there are multiple influences to consider when analysing *The Suffragette/Britannia* and *The Woman's Dreadnought/The Workers' Dreadnought*. As official organs, there is a valid concern that the pages are filled with propaganda.<sup>46</sup> But, even with agenda-driven editorials, these newspapers had to appeal to a wider audience and address a range of societal issues.<sup>47</sup> Throughout this article, writings from Christabel, Sylvia, and reports and editorials from outside reporters not representative of the sisters' opinion alone, including political activists in both Britain and Ireland, are called on. From this, the varied perspective of women's suffrage is explored to consider how these newspapers reported on Ireland.

### **Home Rule, 1912-14**

Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the challenge of 'answering' the Irish question and managing competing political priorities (such as women's suffrage) polarised opinion in Britain and Ireland. To this point, the Home Rule option divided party politics and prompted

an anti-Home Rule response. This was due in part to Home Rule failing to address the right of Ulster's unionist majority to political self-determination in a manner like Ireland's nationalist majority.<sup>48</sup>

Relations between British and Irish feminists strained under the issue of Home Rule too.<sup>49</sup> The 1910 general election left Prime Minister Asquith and the Liberals dependent upon the support of the nationalist backed Irish Parliamentary Party.<sup>50</sup> In return, Liberal's pledged to introduce a third Home Rule Bill.<sup>51</sup> Both Asquith and Irish Parliamentary Party leader John Redmond opposed suffrage (with the latter fearing it hindered the parliamentary progress of the Home Rule Bill).<sup>52</sup> Consequently, Irish nationalist Members of Parliament (MPs) deliberately blocked attempts to give votes to women to keep Asquith and the Liberals in government.<sup>53</sup>

One result of these events is the perceived importance of ensuring women's suffrage was included in the Home Rule Bill.<sup>54</sup> By 1912, most Irish suffragists were generally united in their support for adding suffrage amendments to the third Home Rule Bill.<sup>55</sup> The WSPU's interest in the Irish cause was also sparked. This included establishing English suffragette Dorothy Evans as the WSPU's Ulster organiser (following consultation with Irish suffragette and nationalist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington).<sup>56</sup> Yet tensions between suffragists and unionists developed over unionist fears of women's suffrage distracting from their anti-Home Rule campaign.<sup>57</sup>

Thereafter, groups like the WSPU opposed Liberal candidates at by-elections, which some in Ireland considered to be a threat to the defeat of Home Rule.<sup>58</sup> In England, some saw this move as a way to protect the defeat of suffrage bills, such as the Conciliation Bill, which would extend the right of propertied women to vote in the United Kingdom.<sup>59</sup> When the Bill failed to pass the Commons in March 1912, Christabel sent a poster parade to the British parliament with the message 'NO VOTES FOR WOMEN: NO HOME RULE'.<sup>60</sup> Conversely,

Sylvia was critical of the WSPU's Irish strategy and concerned that the WSPU 'would not leave the Irish question' to Irish women, which was a view shared by some Irish suffrage organisations.<sup>61</sup> The key difference between the WSPU and the majority Irish suffrage view on Home Rule: the WSPU declared itself opposed to Home Rule, while others demanded the inclusion of women within a constitutional settlement.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the debate, by April 1912, a third Home Rule Bill passed its first reading in the Commons. Enacting Home Rule was a means of survival for Asquith's government who relied on the votes of the Irish Parliamentary Party.<sup>63</sup> However, with the Bill's initial passing, the unionist response was quick, with militancy forming a core component of resistance.<sup>64</sup> Although the Bill was rejected in the Lords in January 1913, barring a change in the Liberal government, it was almost certain that by the summer of 1914 the Home Rule Bill would become law.<sup>65</sup> This was due to the passage of the Parliament Act of 1911 (abolishing the absolute veto of the Lords), which meant that Ulster leaders could only block the passage of Home Rule by non-parliamentary means.<sup>66</sup>

British women's suffrage interest in the Irish question is evident in the press coverage from the Pankhurst sisters' newspapers from the onset. Christabel's paper, the first published, aligned itself with Home Rule early on. In one January 1913 *Suffragette* article, Christabel describes herself as a 'consistent' supporter of Home Rule 'for a quarter of a century'.<sup>67</sup> In response to the potential for a measure of women's suffrage to endanger Home Rule, she writes that supporters 'must inevitably look at Home Rule, as we look at other questions of policy, in the light of the political problems and the political principles which thrust themselves upon our attention'.<sup>68</sup> This coverage serves as an indicator of the tone *The Suffragette* would promote and develop throughout the Irish question debates by unsurprisingly prioritising women's suffrage.

At the same time, *The Suffragette* consistently endorsed ‘Votes for Ulster Women’ should Home Rule go into effect and the threatened rival government in Ulster emerge. This call made the front page of one September 1913 issue demanding Irish Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson ‘accept the responsibilities and obligations of a Government’ and ‘give votes to women’.<sup>69</sup> Although Carson opposed women’s suffrage, the September 1913 draft for a Provisional Government for the Ulster region providing the enactment of Home Rule included provisions for the enfranchisement of women.<sup>70</sup> While Unionist records neglect to detail why Carson and unionists extended this promise to grant votes to women, the move was largely viewed as recognition of the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council’s loyalty and political work.<sup>71</sup> And the WSPU were keen to get Carson to commit himself in public to saying women would be granted the vote, so much so that Christabel sent Dorothy Evans to ‘coerce’ Carson ‘by militancy if necessary’.<sup>72</sup>

A subsequent article from *The Suffragette* announcing the ‘decision on the part of Ulster men to share their political rights with women’ declares:

When Ulster men talk of freedom for Ulster, they mean freedom for women as well as for men. When the Government and their supporters talk of freedom for Ireland and Home Rule, they mean freedom for men only and Home Rule for men only... There must be no compromise nor any other settlement of the Irish question, except upon the basis of Votes for Women.<sup>73</sup>

As these articles and movements by the WSPU indicate, the perceived difference between Ulster men and the British government is clear. Yet, this goodwill between Carson and the WSPU was short-lived. Christabel’s desire for ‘no compromise’ was not kept. Instead, in a political move, Carson reneged on his promise for the enfranchisement of Ulster women. Subsequently, starting in November 1913, *The Suffragette* focused on ‘the special

task of preventing the Ulster women's right to vote already conceded by the Unionist leaders being taken away in consequence of any compromise on the Irish question'.<sup>74</sup> In this 'special task', the importance of women's rights and use of militancy was re-emphasised. In one article Christabel draws comparisons to the Irish question arguing:

Every speech on the Irish question turns today not upon the rights or wrongs, but upon the question of whether Ulster will fight and if so, whether Ulster fighting is more dangerous to the Government than Nationalism voting... The power and will to fight, confer, so men think, a title to liberty. And yet, these same men will tell us that women who fight for their liberty are thereby disqualified from having it.<sup>75</sup>

This focus on militancy is present in later articles too. What is interesting to consider is how Ireland presented a suitable comparison for the WSPU to justify its militant tactics and to observe the rights of men and women. The British government's response to the increasingly militarised political situation in Ireland was, for those like the WSPU, a clear indication of the different standards between the sexes. In a May 1913 article, Christabel pointedly asks 'Why are Suffragettes arrested, imprisoned, and tortured while militant men of Ulster go scot free?'<sup>76</sup> When in January 1914 it was rumoured that there were attempts to arrive at a compromise on the Irish question, *The Suffragette* re-emphasised its active protest and call for militancy if the compromise would 'rob Ulster women of the right to vote already admitted and conceded by the Ulster leaders'.<sup>77</sup> These contentions once more confirmed the policy of Christabel, the WSPU, and *The Suffragette*: suffrage first.

By March 1914, the dispute between Carson and suffragettes came to a head. Christabel asserts in one *The Suffragette* article 'Sir Edward Carson has declared war upon women, and women in their turn declare war upon him'.<sup>78</sup> She adds:

Sir Edward Carson has expected, and does expect the women of Ulster to bear their share of the cost and the risk of civil war. Ulster women in their thousands have by the desire, and with the approval of Sir Edward Carson, signed a pledge that they will play their part in the opposition to Home Rule... Women's help is always needed to carry a cause to the point of triumph but at that point almost invariably the women's interest is betrayed by the men. Sir Edward Carson follows this time-dishonoured precedent and now betrays the women.<sup>79</sup>

Clear in its condemnation of Carson removing the provisions for enfranchising women, this editorial also addresses the long history of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. The confrontation between Carson and the WSPU only intensified in later months. By mid-March, Dorothy Evans led a deputation of Ulster women to London to protest outside of Carson's house.<sup>80</sup> *The Suffragette* reported that Carson was 'besieged' and published reports from the doorstep.<sup>81</sup> One report argues that the four day stand-off indicated the 'general public appreciated a fighting spirit and a determined policy' and adds:

So many people only see things when they are right under their noses, and I think when they saw us sitting on that doorstep like Patience on a monument, it really did begin to come home to them that when Suffragettes set out to get a thing they mean to get it.<sup>82</sup>

This coverage stresses the work of the determination of the WSPU and its ability and willingness to disrupt politics. While this description of the events is less about militancy, the use of the term 'fighting spirit' implies it could be called on. The emphasis on the curiosity sparked by the protest also promotes a relatable version of the WSPU's tactics that could be employed to sway the general public, all the while maintaining focus on securing women's right to vote.

Corresponding with *The Suffragette's* call for Carson to honour his promise of Ulster women's vote, Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Woman's Dreadnought* began publication in March 1914. Like *The Suffragette*, *The Woman's Dreadnought* covered women and Ulster but exhibited awareness of outside opinion and concerns. One example of this is an April 1914 article by British social activist, journalist, and women's suffrage sympathiser Henry W. Nevinson that addresses the 'most difficult political problem' of the Irish question and the role of women (despite not having the right to vote) in the debate:

The [Irish] question is one of extraordinary difficulty, but one seems to doubt that women are quite capable of deciding upon it. Ulster women are invited, nay compelled to sign the Covenant. What is more, even in England there is a special Covenant for English women to sign. If there is one question more than another in modern politics upon which English women might be expected to hesitate before giving an opinion, it is the Irish question. It is much more difficult than any other point of Imperial affairs, and English woman probably know less about it.<sup>83</sup>

Nevinson, a founder of the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement and husband to two British women's rights activists, Margaret Wynne Nevinson (married from 1884-1932) and Evelyn Sharp (married from 1933-41), was well-versed and outspoken in the leading political questions of the day, including suffrage and the Irish question.<sup>84</sup> The arguments put forth in this article address the long and layered history of Anglo-Irish relations and the need for awareness of historical context. Groups like the WSPU who had declared 'war' on Asquith and Carson and had also blamed Irish nationalist leaders for blocking the way to voting rights are challenged.<sup>85</sup> Sylvia's consideration of suffrage as part of a wider project of equality resulted in more consistent exchanges with outside editorials which would continue to appear in *The Woman's Dreadnought*. From this, we can see that



while both Pankhurst sisters and their press outlets focused on securing the right to vote, their means of doing so and who they included in the debates differed.

In the same issue of *The Woman's Dreadnought*, the opinion of prominent Irish nationalist and women's rights activist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington is also shared. Skeffington writes of the 'promise for Irish suffragists' with the possibility of the Home Rule Bill arguing:

Sir Edward Carson having already said that he would concede Votes to Ulsterwomen under a Provisional Government, cannot logically oppose their claims, for Ulstermen at least have the protection of the vote... Now that the question of a Referendum for Ulster is mooted Irish women insist upon being consulted: if the Ulster counties are to be allowed to "contract out" of the bill, Ulsterwomen must have a similar right.<sup>86</sup>

This article is another example of a difference in comprehension of the Irish question from the Pankhurst papers and *The Woman's Dreadnought's* use of outside editorials. In this instance, Hanna represents an Irish suffrage perspective through her connection with the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). Although this group was considered the Irish equivalent of the WSPU, and Hanna had shared contact with Christabel, IWFL's focus was Ireland and 'the different political situation of Ireland'.<sup>87</sup> And while Hanna's contention to have Carson keep the already conceded right to vote aligned with what the WSPU and *The Suffragette* advocated, and Hanna was not opposed to the use of militancy, her emphasis on Irish women backed Sylvia's own urging for Ireland's right to resolve its own problems and offers a different perspective from that of *The Suffragette*.

In another *Woman's Dreadnought* article, published just prior to the outbreak of the Great War, Sylvia again conveys her interest in other social political causes while critiquing Asquith's political priorities, writing:

Names for the 'No Rent' strike are coming in, but we want them to come in fast still. The Irish question will soon be settled, and before the politicians have time to persuade the public that the presence of some other great problems excuses them from doing anything for us, we women must insist that the question of our enfranchisement shall be dealt with straight away.<sup>88</sup>

This article brings into focus the issue of enfranchisement. Particularly of note is the way in which Sylvia writes about the Irish question being on the verge of resolution. Although Home Rule was considered imminent, the likelihood of the Irish question reaching an agreeable resolution at this point was unlikely for a number of reasons, not least because the solution of Home Rule split political opinion and increasingly did not satisfy the aspirations of the main political parties in Ireland. Ireland was on the cusp of a civil war and the threat of violence and an unresolved Irish question was a major consideration for British and Irish political leaders alike. Sylvia's 'soon' settled comment on Home Rule is perhaps an indication of her overriding desire to have Ireland work out its own political problems.

Ultimately, the Home Rule Bill did receive royal assent in September 1914. However, its implementation was suspended due to the outbreak of the First World War (initially for a year but later for the duration of the war).<sup>89</sup> Thereafter, with the start of the Great War, both *The Suffragette* and *The Woman's Dreadnought* transitioned coverage to focusing primarily on the war and the home front.

### **‘The Home Rule Act is not secure’, 1915-17**

Britain’s entry into the First World War in August 1914 had a profound impact on the Irish question and women’s suffrage.<sup>90</sup> While the fear of civil war in Ireland abated with the passage and suspension of the third Home Rule Bill, the Great War offered a continuation of politics by other means.<sup>91</sup> Initially in Ireland, both Carson and Redmond encouraged enlistment to the British war effort to help leverage their respective political aspirations.<sup>92</sup> For unionists, the war effort took priority as Home Rule was suspended.<sup>93</sup> Yet for nationalists, the Great War extinguished hopes of seeing Home Rule implemented.<sup>94</sup> And many Irish Parliamentary Party MPs remained unwilling to risk supporting women’s suffrage for fear of disruption.<sup>95</sup> However, while Redmond had secured support by calling on Irish citizens to defend the rights of small nations, this call ignited movements outside of the Irish Parliamentary Party, which increasingly undermined this call to action.<sup>96</sup> Among this was the notable growth of a southern republican contingent.

For the British suffrage movement, war led to the disintegration of many suffrage groups. This was in part a result of a shift from Christabel and Emmeline who opted to support the war effort, end the WSPU’s militant campaign, and close local branches.<sup>97</sup> The goal of acquiring the parliamentary vote was not deserted, instead the WSPU’s work on the home front represented a new means of achieving enfranchisement (and avoiding potential charges of treason).<sup>98</sup> *The Suffragette* was re-named *Britannia* in 1915, signifying its commitment to promoting British patriotism.<sup>99</sup> Despite this change, in one Commons debate, Liberal politician Herbert Samuel describes the paper as ‘ostensibly loyal, but undoubtedly it is most mischievous’,<sup>100</sup> suggesting Christabel and the WSPU never fully abandoned the ability to disrupt and challenge politics. Contrarily, Sylvia did not believe that Britain had the right to engage in war or imperialism and instead promoted pacifism and support of the working classes of East London within *The Woman’s Dreadnought*.<sup>101</sup>

For both *Britannia* and *The Woman's Dreadnought*, reporting on the Irish question significantly diminished once war broke out. It was not until the Easter Rising in April 1916 that reporting on Ireland once more registered in the papers, with a majority of the coverage based in *The Woman's Dreadnought*. The events of the Rising constituted a republican charge (different from Redmond's constitutional nationalists who were not involved) seeking to end British rule in Ireland by means of seizing a number of buildings around Dublin, assembling a provisional government, and reading the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.<sup>102</sup> Soon after the Rising ended, Sylvia published a front-page article for *The Woman's Dreadnought* addressing 'our view' of the rebellion in which she argues:

Justice can make but one reply to the Irish rebellion and that is to demand that Ireland shall be allowed to govern herself... The reasons for the discontent which has caused the rebellion are clearly apparent. In the first place the Home Rule Act fails to satisfy considerable sections of Irish men and women, who regard it as a mere extension of local government... In the second place, the Home Rule Act is not secure.<sup>103</sup>

This article offers valuable insight into how Sylvia perceived Ireland and the Irish question in the Great War setting and her continued desire for Ireland to work out its own political problems. She understood the Rising in the context of the limitation of Home Rule and noted its inability to meet Irish political demands.<sup>104</sup> However, in this criticism there is no clear indication of a plausible alternative solution or how Ireland would govern itself in a climate of dissenting and diverging opinion. A potentially significant change to consider was the impact of the Rising on the Irish suffrage movement. Most importantly, this included the declaration of equal citizenship of Irish men and women within the Proclamation.<sup>105</sup> Sylvia's

previous collaborator Connolly is purported to have insisted on this inclusion and is believed to have told Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in advance of the Proclamation's reading.<sup>106</sup>

Another *Woman's Dreadnought* article covering the Royal Commission's report on the causes of the Easter Rising further supported the desire to have Ireland work out its own political problems by explaining:

One of its opinions is that "If the Irish system of government be regarded as a whole it is anomalous in quiet times, and almost unworkable in times of crisis." This conclusion is quite sound, but the system *is and was not "Irish"*; it was forced by the British Government on Ireland. Let those anxious to settle the Irish question pay heed to this, and allow the Irish people to choose its own Government; it is the only solution!<sup>107</sup>

This contention against imperialism matches a tone that Sylvia and *The Woman's Dreadnought* would continue to promote throughout the war. The article draws focus on the colonial legacy of the British connection in Ireland. Yet, unsurprisingly considering Sylvia's anti-imperialist leanings, like the contentions put forth in the previous article, this article also simply advocates for Ireland to choose its own government without a clear indication of what that would look like in practice and with Home Rule suspended. As this article suggests, and as the Home Rule debates leading to the outbreak of the war had indicated, unionists and nationalists were at increasingly violent odds with what kind of connection (if any) Ireland should have with the United Kingdom. The question remained: how to solve the Irish question?

As war progressed, 1917 marked a significant juncture in the Irish political landscape as well as a turning point in both Pankhurst sisters' newspaper coverage of the war. In Ireland, the July 1917 East Clare by-election resulted in a 5/2 majority victory of Sinn Féin

candidate Éamon de Valera.<sup>108</sup> This victory signalled an important shift in Sinn Féin republicanism popularly overtaking the Irish Parliamentary Party's brand of nationalism. In this changing political landscape, *The Woman's Dreadnought* renamed to *The Workers' Dreadnought*, reflecting the scope of coverage and political campaigns the paper was taking up. *Britannia* maintained its support of the war effort and began to link the Irish question to a so-called 'German threat' (a fear of a connection between Germany and Ireland). The rise of Sinn Féin unquestionably impacted this threat. In a reprint of a speech at the Queen's Hall in July, Christabel warns:

Separation would mean a German conquest of Ireland, and Ireland a German base. What we say as ordinary British people is that we do not want, and we will not have Germany established in Ireland, and as the majority, or a considerable section, of the Irish people now support the Sinn Fein movement, we must consider the position in the light of that fact... We believe that the separation of Ireland from the rest of the kingdom would not only be a disaster to Ireland, but a disaster to us.<sup>109</sup>

Another *Britannia* article from August outlines the feared German connection in Ireland and Sinn Féin's potential for harm via 'separation and secession' in nine points. Point seven poses:

Considering that Irish separation inevitably means German invasion and conquest of Ireland... is not the Irish question one which concerns the whole people of the British Isles and not the people of Ireland alone?<sup>110</sup>

Point nine also asks:

Has the naval peril that would threaten the United States in the event of Germany capturing Ireland as a naval base in the Atlantic been clearly brought to the attention of the American Government and people?<sup>111</sup>

A later set of articles further advance a fear of international repercussions from the unresolved Irish question. One October 1917 article argues:

The autonomy and political and economic development of Ireland is not an internal affair of England, but is a vital interest to Europe, and for us, who are fighting to wrest the tyranny of the seas from England, a free Ireland is one of the greatest importance.<sup>112</sup>

Similarly, in another reprint of a speech at the Queen's Hall in November 1917, Christabel warns:

We believe that the Irish political question is to-day fraught with danger to Ireland, to the rest of the British Isles, and to the whole Alliance. We are of the opinion that Ireland must be saved from herself... The Irish people ought to understand the fact that separation from this country means that they will be swallowed by Germany... We, the British people, are on this point trustees not only for the future generations of the British Isles, but also for the whole of Europe and for the United States.<sup>113</sup>

The contentions and concerns addressed in all of these articles draw attention to the geopolitical importance of Ireland for Britain and its allies by specifically linking the security of the United Kingdom to a conquered Ireland and a German threat. Germany was a concern

not only because the United Kingdom and its allies were actively engaged in battle against Germany in the Great War, but there was precedent.<sup>114</sup> In one prominent example from 1915, prior to the Easter Rising, Irish nationalists Roger Casement and Joseph Plunkett went to Germany to secure arms to aid the Irish cause.<sup>115</sup> This connection meant that many initially believed the 1916 Rising to be a German plot. While the feared link between Ireland and Germany was not a concept unique to *Britannia*, the fact that these articles directly apply the threat to Sinn Féin is perhaps an indication of a new sense of urgency following the by-election results of needing to positively resolve the Irish question before the feared worst could happen. Yet the extent to which a German-occupied Ireland would benefit Ireland and find support among Irish political parties, including Sinn Féin, and the general public is debatable. Despite this, the feared connection between Ireland and Germany would continue to circulate throughout the war (and after).

Within this context, the concerns from Christabel and *Britannia* came at a time of noteworthy changes to the WSPU too. In November 1917, the WSPU re-launched as the Women's Party, with an aim of preparing women for forthcoming enfranchisement.<sup>116</sup> This change was in response to the June 1917 Commons vote in favour of adding a women's clause to the Representation of the People Bill, granting the parliamentary vote to women aged 30 and over who met a property qualification.<sup>117</sup> The direction of this vote was shaped by the work of the 1916-17 Speakers Conference (the brainchild of British Unionist politician Walter Long), which worked to address debates surrounding adult suffrage.<sup>118</sup> Among the recommendations from the Conference was suffrage for female householders or wives of householders aged over 30 or 35.<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, Ireland was intentionally left out of the Conference's recommendations, with the rationale that the Irish quota of seats would be addressed once suspended Home Rule was settled.<sup>120</sup> At the same time, alternatives to Home Rule were being discussed at the Irish Convention (started in July 1917), which was formed



of local Irish representatives (although Sinn Féin refused to participate).<sup>121</sup> However, despite vocal lobbying by Irish women's groups, women were excluded from the proceedings.<sup>122</sup> With regard to the Irish question, the Women's Party aligned with unionists and endorsed strengthening ties and connections with the British Empire (which was a political policy shared by many Conservatives of the day but distinguished in the continued promotion of feminist programmes).<sup>123</sup>

### **'The Irish question is an open sore', 1918**

As the Great War entered its final year, important changes in the fight for women's suffrage and the Irish question debates were underway. During this period, *Britannia* entered into its final months of production. From January 1918 onwards, the paper's focus of coverage regarding the Irish question was two-fold. On the one hand, it centred on maintaining union in the United Kingdom. One article, titled 'The Better Way', asserts:

We persist in thinking that those who want to create a separate Parliament for Ireland are on the wrong track, and that the best thing for Ireland, as also for England, Scotland, and Wales, is to draw closer together in Union than they have ever been before.<sup>124</sup>

Similar sentiments are conveyed in another *Britannia* article that contends:

There is only one way of really settling the Irish question, and that is to try to preserve, or rather to regenerate, the Union that binds England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales together... The nicely balanced racial mixture that is the strength of the United Kingdom must not be upset by a withdrawal of the large Celtic element contributed by Ireland... We need Ireland and Ireland needs us! That is the true summing up of the Irish question.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps still drawing from a fear of a German threat, the language in these articles is clear in promoting the perceived benefits of maintaining union for the United Kingdom as a whole. Statements such as ‘the better way’ and ‘only one way’ imply a superior method of handling the Irish question than alternatives of separation from groups such as Sinn Féin. Yet the extent to which this desire for union could and would find acceptance in the changed Irish political climate is not addressed. As indicated in the make-up of the Irish Convention, the issue of Home Rule and how to resolve the Irish question still divided opinion and required thinking beyond what is outlined in these articles.

On the other hand, *Britannia* also addresses the rights of women electors to participate in political proceedings. Although the WSPU and Women’s Party never abandoned the call for female enfranchisement, this desire for women’s participation in debates (including on Ireland) was undoubtedly spurred by the Representation of the People Act, which received royal assent in February 1918.<sup>126</sup> This call underscores the importance of the interface between gender and nation politics because of the newly enfranchised electorate. In this regard, though different circumstances, *Britannia* harkened back to a political tone reminiscent of the debates from when the paper was *The Suffragette*. One article demands:

As we have shown, the Irish question is one of those which the 6,000,000 women electors must have full time and opportunity to consider and help to decide. Any misgovernment which Ireland may claim to have suffered in the past is not the fault of women, who have not had until now any political power either to govern or misgovern. Therefore, as newcomers into the political field, women can have a double claim to be consulted on the Irish question.<sup>127</sup>

Another article similarly states:

Having obtained the vote we do not intend that it shall remain a dead letter so far as we are concerned, or be treated as a scrap of paper so far as other people are concerned... We demand that henceforward the women of the country, through their leaders, shall be kept informed of the progress of war diplomacy and war policy. We also demand that such questions as the Irish question and the Labour question and others shall not be dealt with in a hole-and-corner fashion without consulting the Women's Party.<sup>128</sup>

In contrast, *The Workers' Dreadnought* maintained its anti-imperialist leanings and continued to support the cause of Irish independence. This is well summarised in one October 1918 article that reasons:

It is important that the question of Irish self-government should in no way be confounded with that of devolution. The Irish question is an open sore, which must be healed by the grant of the complete independence the majority of Irish people demand. If, as is contended, economic considerations make it best that there should be a link between Great Britain and Ireland, let the link be freely made by agreement between both nations after Ireland has been made a free agent.<sup>129</sup>

The language in this article is a continuance of contentions from *The Workers' Dreadnought* of a desire for Irish independence. Yet, as with previous articles, the difference in political opinion in Ireland, primarily between unionists and republicans, are not equally addressed. But, when compared with the articles from *Britannia* urging union, they offer useful examples of the divergence of opinion between the Pankhurst sisters and the different levels of understanding and priority of the Irish question in British suffrage circles. This split

in opinion is reflective of the challenge of resolving the Irish question, particularly in the context of the Great War. How to bridge the gap in diverging political opinion and craft a solution that would appease the majority of opinion was no easy task. And, as the Pankhurst sisters' press coverage indicates, the repercussions for failing to come to a solution were potentially harmful for those outside of Ireland too, especially as Britain remained engaged in the war.

When the colossal burden of the Great War finally ended with the Armistice in November 1918, important milestones to women's political involvement followed but the challenge of resolving the Irish question remained. Following war's end, in December 1918, the first general election in which women who met the stipulations of the Representation of the People Bill could vote was held.<sup>130</sup> Seventeen women also stood election to parliament as an outcome of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, which passed the previous month.<sup>131</sup> This included Christabel, running on a Women's Party platform of securing peace against German aggression and improving the social conditions of the working classes.<sup>132</sup> A rival candidate, suffrage sympathiser Constance Markievicz, campaigned as a Sinn Féin candidate from her cell in London's Holloway prison.<sup>133</sup> Markievicz was serving a sentence for her alleged involvement in a German plot.<sup>134</sup> Markievicz beat out Christabel and the other rival candidates, winning the Dublin St Patrick division seat and becoming the first woman elected to the British parliament.<sup>135</sup> Markievicz's election victory was a hint of the road ahead with regard to the Irish question as Markievicz did not take her seat in the Commons, but instead joined other Sinn Féin MPs in refusing to acknowledge the authority of the British government.<sup>136</sup> Her victory is also another indication of the interconnectedness of the Irish question and women's suffrage and how the two questions interacted with other political issues of the day.

## Conclusion

Ireland and women's suffrage proved to be two prominent national and political questions for the British government to attend to during the 1912-18 period. Responses to and solutions for each split opinion in both Britain and Ireland. This split fractured further during the Great War. The war challenged the loyalties of suffragettes and sparked a critical debate in Irish nationalism over the issue of pledging Irish troops to the war effort.<sup>137</sup> As Ward observes too, during this time, Ireland's struggle for self-determination is often left unconnected from women's fight for citizenship but consideration must be given to the role of women as well as a more critical attitude towards the role played by Britain in Irish affairs.<sup>138</sup>

By studying the press outputs of Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, we are able to get a first-hand account of how two leading figures in the British women's suffrage movement, representing different viewpoints from the movement, reported and editorialised this period. From their newspaper coverage and editorials, we can identify examples of how British and Irish feminists interacted with the leading political questions of the day and can appreciate how the issue of Ireland entangled feminists on all sides of the political aisle. We can also see how the newspapers interacted with, and sometimes matched, other popular opinion circulating in Britain and Ireland at the time.

Throughout the 1912-18 period, both *The Suffragette/Britannia* and *The Woman's Dreadnought/The Workers' Dreadnought* were clear in outlining their political priorities. For Christabel and *The Suffragette/Britannia*, women's suffrage was prioritized. And, during the Great War, political union with Ireland was championed. Conversely, for Sylvia and *The Woman's Dreadnought/The Workers' Dreadnought*, emphasis was placed on securing Ireland's independence. Through this coverage we see examples of the Pankhurst sisters' diverging political opinion, which also evoked wider women's suffrage themes, and how the

Great War and immediate post-war period shaped and interacted with the competing priorities of women's suffrage and the Irish question.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Aubrey Scheopner-Torres at Saint Anselm College for her generous support and constructive feedback. Thanks to the *Women's History Review* team and blind reviewers for their thoughtful comments. Thanks to Iris Lim at SOAS for being a soundboard. Thanks also to Professor Richard Grayson at Goldsmiths, University of London for his continued encouragement and advice. And, finally, thanks to Professor Senia Pašeta at Oxford for sparking my interest in this topic following the 2018 Kehoe Lecture in Irish History.

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- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-73.
- <sup>99</sup> Smith, 'The Pankhursts and the War', 103.
- <sup>100</sup> House of Commons Debate, March 15, 1916, vol. 80, cc. 2081-2.
- <sup>101</sup> Smith, 'The Pankhursts and the War', 103 & 110.
- <sup>102</sup> Pašeta, *Modern Ireland*, 75-77
- <sup>103</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, 'The Irish Rebellion: Our View', *The Woman's Dreadnought*, May 6, 1916, cover.
- <sup>104</sup> Bell, 'Sylvia Pankhurst and the Irish Revolution', 38.
- <sup>105</sup> Ward, 'Suffrage First', 34.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>107</sup> 'Parliament As We See It', *The Woman's Dreadnought*, July 8, 1916, 507.
- <sup>108</sup> Ronan Fanning, '1917: The Metamorphosis of Éamon de Valera', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 417 (2016): 24-30, 26.
- <sup>109</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, 'Ireland and the German Peril', *Britannia*, August 3, 1917, 69.
- <sup>110</sup> 'Questions about Ireland', *Britannia*, October 26, 1917, 162.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> ‘German Designs on Ireland’, *Britannia*, October 26, 1917, 162.

<sup>113</sup> Christabel Pankhurst, ‘The Women’s Party’, *Britannia*, November 16, 1917, 190.

<sup>114</sup> Links between Ireland and Germany occurred on a number of occasions during WWI. For more see Matthew Erin Plowman, ‘Irish Republicans and the Indo-German Conspiracy of World War I’, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 7, no. 3 (2003): 80-105.

<sup>115</sup> Danny Denton, ‘On the Truth of the “German Plot”’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 59 (2007): 122-33, 128.

<sup>116</sup> June Purvis, ‘The Women's Party of Great Britain (1917–1919): A Forgotten Episode in British Women's Political History’, *Women's History Review*, 25, no. 4 (2016): 638-651, 638 & 640.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 639-40.

<sup>118</sup> Brian Walker, ‘Votes for Women (and Men): The Representation of the People Act 1918’, *History Ireland* 26, no. 3 (2018): 34-37, 35.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>121</sup> Karl F. Geiser, ‘The Irish Convention’, *The American Political Science Review* 12, no. 2 (1918): 292-96, 293-94.

<sup>122</sup> Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 232.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 641-42.

<sup>124</sup> ‘The Better Way’, *Britannia*, January 18, 1918, 255.

<sup>125</sup> ‘The Irish Question – Regenerate and Confirm the Union’, *Britannia*, January 25, 1918, 258.

<sup>126</sup> Purvis, ‘The Women's Party’, 639; UK Parliament, ‘1918 Representation of the People Act’, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1918-representation-of-the-people-act/> (accessed 2 July 2019).

- <sup>127</sup> ‘Review of the Week’, *Britannia*, February 8, 1918, 30.
- <sup>128</sup> ‘The Right of Women Citizens’, *Britannia*, February 15, 1918, front page.
- <sup>129</sup> ‘Questions of the Day’, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*, October 19, 1918, 1099.
- <sup>130</sup> UK Parliament, ‘1918 Representation of the People Act’.
- <sup>131</sup> UK Parliament, ‘Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act’,  
<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/parliamentary-collections/nancy-astor/parliament-qualification-of-women-act/> (accessed 23 April 2019).
- <sup>132</sup> Purvis, ‘The Women's Party’, 645.
- <sup>133</sup> Senia Pašeta, ‘Markievicz [née Gore-Booth], Constance Georgine, Countess Markievicz in the Polish Nobility (1868-1927), Irish republican and first woman elected to parliament’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10> (accessed 3 Dec 2019).
- <sup>134</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>135</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>136</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>137</sup> Angus Mitchell, ‘1914-18 and the War on Peace’, *History Ireland* 22, no. 4 (2014): 46-49, 47.
- <sup>138</sup> Ward, ‘Conflicting Interests’, 127-28.