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"Women who dared to ask for a vote": The Missing Memoirs of the Scottish Suffragettes

Gemma Elliott
University of Glasgow

Abstract: *In an area of political history as underrepresented as women's fight for their right to vote, the involvement of Scotland's suffrage campaigners is even less known, researched, and discussed. These women contributed greatly to the cause, taking part in just as much militant activism as their London-based peers, but their stories have not received recognition in the same way. Some Scottish suffrage campaigners did seek to have their voices heard by writing first-person memoirs on their struggles, but these have largely gone unpublished and unnoticed. This article discusses the fascinating lives and autobiographies of two Scottish Women's Social and Political Union members, Elizabeth Thomson and Jessie Stephen, and questions why their fascinating stories have remained hidden away in inaccessible archives for so long.*

Keywords: *suffrage, suffragette, Scotland, memoir, autobiography, archive*

If women's fight for the vote in Britain has been underrepresented in history, then the involvement of Scottish women has suffered even more. Suffrage historian Leah Leneman addressed this in the introduction to her monograph *A Guid Cause: The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland*, stating that this element of women's history has been told "almost exclusively from the point of view of the metropolitan leadership".¹ However, Scottish women, and women living in Scotland, were just as politically active and just as important to the cause as their London based counterparts, which Leneman has tried to make known. It seems that what is missing from the history of the campaign for women's suffrage in Scotland is the stories of the women themselves, which Leneman addresses in *The Scottish Suffragettes*:

The point is that those women [Scottish suffrage campaigners] did not seek attention for themselves. Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst were charismatic figures in "The Suffragette Movement", as Sylvia called it. They produced autobiographies centred on their personal involvement and naturally their close acolytes were also included in the story; but the lively, articulate campaigners elsewhere in England, and in Scotland and Wales, without whom the whole thing would have gone nowhere, barely got a mention.²

However, what Leneman fails to note is that Scottish women fighting for suffrage did record their own history and write their own lives; their stories have just received very limited recognition.

British suffrage autobiographies have attracted some critical attention in recent years, although the focus has predominantly been on the writings of those within the middle class,

London-based campaign groups such as the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union. Hilda Kean, in an article on Canadian-born suffrage campaigner and WSPU member Mary Richardson, discusses the large number of memoirs which were written by women involved in the suffrage movement as a method of forming their own identities within their political groups, noting that these women: "constructed their own identities through public activities and autobiographical writing".³ Maroula Joannou also discusses this focus on the personal in memoirs of suffragettes, stating that: "the focus on individual subjectivity in suffragette autobiography involves the construction of a personal identity in which investment in the communal is at least as strong as investment in the individualistic".⁴ Here, Joannou and Kean use the same language of the construction of selfhood to describe the life writing of the suffrage campaigners, suggesting that these women who chose to write memoirs did so with the purpose of defining their own roles within the collective action of the campaign groups. Hilda Kean has also noted, in a separate essay on suffrage commemoration, the lengths suffrage campaigners went to not only to record their histories but to preserve them for future study, working as their own historians:

In the suffrage context the role of the militant suffrage feminists themselves, as public historians, collecting, preserving – and displaying – the material culture of the movement, needs to be recognised. The suffragettes contributed to their own historical survival.⁵

In an article on the autobiographical writings of Christabel, Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst, June Purvis and Maureen Wright have also discussed this idea of suffragettes as active historians of their own campaigns, noting that the memoirs of these three women, amongst the most recognised names within women's history, are vital historical resources despite their personal biases:

Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst were all participants in, as well as chroniclers of, the suffragette movement. Their narratives collapse the boundaries so many have constructed between so-called "objective" history, as told by a third person narrator, and the "subjective" story of the autobiographer. Yet histories are subjective and laden with values, and autobiographies are history for their authors. All three Pankhurst women positioned themselves in both the individual context of the part each believed she played within the suffragette movement, as well as within the broader, general context of the campaign.⁶

Sylvia Pankhurst's autobiographical writing was also considered useful at the time of its production, with Krista Cowman explaining in an article on suffrage campaigner Mary Gawthorpe that Pankhurst's texts could be used as something of a guide to grassroots campaigning for younger recruits:

Pankhurst's autobiographical perspective helped Gawthorpe, a slightly late entrant into the WSPU, make sense of some of her own experiences. Unlike Annie Kenney, the other prominent working-class leader with whom she is frequently compared, Gawthorpe had had no direct experience of the genesis of the WSPU

prior to its adoption of militancy. Nor, despite sharing the Independent Labour Party (ILP) background of the Pankhurst family, did she have personal knowledge of the radical politics of Lancashire before her appointment as Manchester organiser, having been born and bred in Leeds. Engaging with the WSPU after its move to London must have provoked many queries for its new organiser which the speed and intensity of the campaign gave no opportunity to investigate.⁷

However, Laura E. Nym Mayhall critiques this preoccupation with the Pankhursts and with the WSPU, claiming that current feminist writing focuses too closely on their contribution: "what all these interpretations share is a belief in the centrality of the suffragette experience as told from one perspective – that of the Women's Social and Political Union under the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst".⁸ The suffragette experience and the urge to record their histories as they were happening, however, was not limited to the Pankhursts and other middle-class English campaigners who remain well-known names of women's history. Suffrage campaigners from outside of this metropolitan and elite mainstream also wrote autobiographies detailing fascinating lives of political activism, with many of these remaining unpublished and inaccessible in archives. This article looks at just two of these, written by Elizabeth Thomson and Jessie Stephen.

Elizabeth Thomson and Jessie Stephen were both members of Scottish branches of the Women's Social and Political Union in the early years of the twentieth century. With Thomson based in Edinburgh and Stephen in Glasgow, there is no evidence that the two met or campaigned together, but they are linked in their urge to write down their experiences of political activism, with both women having produced first-person memoirs. Elizabeth Thomson's unpublished autobiography is held in the University of Glasgow's Archive Services⁹ and Jessie Stephen's, which is also unpublished, can be found in Manchester's Working Class Movement Library.¹⁰ Published approximately five decades apart, the two memoirs differ greatly in their tone and content, with Thomson's written during her years as an active campaigner whilst Stephen's comes some years after universal suffrage has been achieved. Stephen's memoir is also intensely personal, while Thomson at times combines her own life story with that of her sister. However, both are similar in that they cover almost the entire lives of their writers and therefore the time spent campaigning for women's suffrage is just one element described in the lives of activism that these two women led. This then differentiates the memoirs from the more well-known suffrage autobiographical texts, such as those written by the Pankhursts, in that their focus has not solely been on campaigning, but rather it forms just one important part of a wider life story.

In the interview with popular feminist magazine *Spare Rib* for which Jessie Stephen is possibly best known she complains that books on women's history do not represent her experience of the suffrage campaign as it really was

There was a lot more than the vote. You see, most of these books - I've read a good few of them at different times - they don't really go very deep. They don't talk about the discussions we used to have, the aspirations the ordinary member of the W.S.P.U. was thinking about. These were about jobs, about wages, about

the present matrimonial laws. All that sort of thing used to be discussed by us. I didn't know a lot about it, but some of these women did.¹¹

What Stephen does not mention here is that her memoir, *Submission is for Slaves*, along with Elizabeth Thomson's *The Life Story of Miss Elizabeth Thomson*, are the stories which do go deeper and address these omissions. Here, Stephen's claim that most texts on women's history focus only on the campaign for suffrage and fail to discuss the whole host of other problems women have faced is a vital one. She makes a case for including memoirs like her own and Elizabeth Thomson's, which do cover a variety of issues and which show the real diversity of ages and social classes involved in the suffrage campaign, in the wider discussion on women's political histories.

Elizabeth Thomson, born in Glasgow in 1847, is an unusual figure in the suffrage movement as she was in her sixties when she first became interested in campaigning and indeed became involved in violent militant action despite her age. Her father, Robert Dundas Thomson, graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1831 with a medical degree, and her maternal grandfather, Thomas Thomson, was Regius Professor of Chemistry at the University from 1818 to 1852. Her memoir, presumably held in the University of Glasgow's archives due to her father and grandfather's connections, describes how, following her grandfather's death in 1852, Thomson and her family moved to London, where she spent the remainder of her childhood. Much of Thomson's unpublished autobiography details her time travelling the world and she often draws attention to the work that she observed of women, although her feminism is not explicitly stated.

In 1879 Thomson was treated by Sophia Jex-Blake, the first practising female doctor in Scotland and a feminist campaigner. Speaking of this encounter in her autobiography, Thomson states: "On my return to Edinburgh I saw Dr. Jex Blake who had just completed her study at Zurich and settled in Manor Place. She kept me lying down all winter, and in the next summer '80 I was better".¹² Thomson seems to have deliberately sought out female doctors, of which there were very few at the time, as she also mentions being treated by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, sister of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Anderson was the first English woman to qualify as a doctor and Thomson claims that she "cured me after a few weeks treatment".¹³ Thomson also writes about a Dr Caroline Sturge, who treated a foot injury she suffered in 1897.

Throughout the 1890s and 1900s Thomson travelled with her sister Agnes, with both of them working as teachers and missionaries. They visited India, Japan, the USA, Germany and Italy, amongst many other countries, returning to the UK, via Vienna, Prague, Dresden and Berlin in 1909 to settle in Edinburgh.

In June 1909, aged 61, Thomson saw women's suffrage campaigner Emmeline Pankhurst, leader of the Women's Social and Political Union, speak at Synod Hall in Edinburgh. She was motivated by this speech, along with her sister, to join the WSPU and noted that Pankhurst's stories of hardship in prison had influenced their decision: "we were horrified, and made up our minds to join the W.S.P.U. at once".¹⁴ In October 1909 a large protest for women's suffrage took place in Edinburgh, with a march along Princes Street, which Thomson describes in her memoir as "well arranged" but "rowdy".¹⁵ In 1910, Thomson and her sister travelled to London to join the Pankhursts in their increasingly

physical, and at times violent, fight for women's suffrage. On 18 November 1910 the infamous clash between suffrage campaigners and police officers, known as Black Friday, took place on the streets of London. Thomson describes this day, noting that she was hurt by a man hitting her in the back but that the other women involved were "so careful not to hurt each other"¹⁶ in the crush of bodies, exemplifying the solidarity of the movement. Thomson continued to campaign for the WSPU in London despite her age and the violence involved. In 1911 she was held at Cannon Row Police Station for throwing stones at government buildings. She explains that: "1911 was our first experience of the hatred of the Government to women who dared to ask for a vote",¹⁷ presumably the source of the anger that led to her to participate in the destruction of property. In 1912 she was imprisoned in Holloway Gaol for one month for her part in a suffrage protest.

In 1912 and 1913 Thomson travelled in Scandinavia, returning to Edinburgh in 1913 where her WSPU efforts continued. On 19 May 1913, aged 65, she went on trial at Jedburgh, Edinburgh, for her part in the attempted arson at Kelso racecourse on 5 April of the same year. She was tried alongside her sister Agnes and two other well-known Scottish suffrage campaigners, Arabella Scott and Edith Hudson. Thomson was sentenced to three months in Calton Prison but took part in a hunger strike which led to her early release under the Cat and Mouse Act. On 31 May, against court orders, Thomson fled Edinburgh for Germany. Edinburgh court records from 1913, held in the National Records of Scotland, show that on 27 May the police claimed to "of course know where they [Thomson and Arabella Scott] are living" but they admitted on 13 June 1913 that "the police have no information to the present whereabouts of Elizabeth Thomson and Edith Hudson and are continuing their search for them".¹⁸ The police did not find Thomson and she spent the winter of 1913 in San Sebastian, Spain, before travelling to London in May 1914. Thomson died at her home in Edinburgh on 12 March 1918.¹⁹

Elizabeth Thomson is not a well-known figure of the Scottish suffrage movement. The only mention of her in Leneman's *A Guid Cause* is in reference to the attempted arson at Kelso racecourse, which also involved Edith Hudson and Arabella Scott who are more frequently associated with the movement in Scotland. Leneman describes Elizabeth and her sister Agnes as "hardly the stereotype young WSPU militants",²⁰ noting their ages of 65 and 67 respectively at the time of their arrests. This reinforces the unusual nature of their campaigning but also suggests that the Thomsons were notable for nothing more than their age, rather than as the tireless and militant campaigners that they were. Elizabeth Crawford is also guilty of this, referring to the women as "two elderly sisters"²¹. As Thomson's memoir has never been published it is therefore mainly accessible just to the academic community and to those who know where to look and what to search for in online archival records. Because of this, the only information on her life of international travel and militant activism are these brief mentions in connection to the Kelso racecourse incident, meaning that little information about Thomson, other than her advanced age, can be accessed by the wider public.

Jessie Stephen is far better known than Thomson. This is due in part to her lifelong dedication to campaigning for trade unions and her 1922 election as a Labour councillor, but also thanks to her aforementioned 1975 interview with *Spare Rib*, where she discusses everything from her political ambitions to helping her mother with matters of birth control.

Stephen's socialist politics, derived from her working-class background, make her an interesting figure in the women's suffrage movement as the two forms of political activism were often thought to be incompatible. June Hannam and Karen Hunt, in their text *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s*, note that there was a "fragility of any possible alliance, let alone identity, between the two movements"²² of socialism and suffrage and discuss how the Women's Social and Political Union, itself formed in conjunction with the Independent Labour Party, split from the left-wing party with some fearing that "suffrage had made mischief in the ranks of socialism".²³ Thus, Stephen's negotiation of her conflicting identities as working-class socialist and militant suffragette mean that she should be considered as significant for adding a different dimension to our understanding of the campaign for women's suffrage.

Like Thomson, Stephen, born in 1894, starts her memoir from childhood, crediting her early upbringing for her political leanings: "I know with certainty that my innate urge to rebellion against the injustices of our society were fostered and encouraged by my father".²⁴ Her father was a member of the Independent Labour Party and enrolled his children in Socialist Sunday School, with Stephen noting that: "what we learned there was in no way inferior to the ethics taught elsewhere".²⁵ Stephen had aspirations of attending university but the financial situation of her family forced her instead to go into full-time employment in domestic service. It was during her time in domestic service that she began to fully embrace her need to participate in politics, inspired by the low pay which domestic servants received, and the poor conditions in which many were expected to live. Stephen enlisted other maids from properties nearby and set up the Scottish Domestic Workers' Federation.

Around the same time as her involvement in union activities was beginning, Stephen also became interested in the fight for women's voting rights and joined a Glasgow branch of the WSPU. She notes in her autobiography the great variety of fellow suffrage campaigners who had joined her group

We had established a group in Glasgow in which there was a very mixed membership indeed, there were ladies who came from wealthy families, there were the ordinary middle class section, usually the intellectuals, and there was a fair scraping too of socialist and ordinary working women.²⁶

Stephen goes into detail about the campaign activity for which she is best known: the destruction of mail in post boxes with acid. It is for this action that she is mentioned in the texts of women's history, with Crawford noting that she "took part, surreptitiously, in the militant campaign"²⁷ by carrying out her destructive activities unnoticed in her domestic servant uniform. Leneman also discusses the postal attacks in *The Scottish Suffragettes*, claiming that "Jessie never encountered suspicion, and had no compunction about carrying out these attacks".²⁸ Elspeth King's pamphlet *The Scottish Women's Suffrage Movement* mentions Stephen's acid attacks but notes that "few working class women took part in the militant action",²⁹ marking Stephen out as an anomaly in the movement, despite her own claims that her WSPU branch had a very diverse membership. Discussing the acid attacks in her own words, Stephen writes

To my young mind these were exciting times and one of my assignments was the destruction of the contents of a postal pillar box. It was part of a most carefully planned operation to cover the whole city and the timing was perfect. Every member taking part in this had to go out at a certain time and deposit a parcel of acid into the pillar box and walk away unconcernedly leaving the rest to fate. Dressed in my maid's uniform I walked from my place of employment down to the corner of the street where the pillar box stood, dropped in my little package, walked away again and reached home without interruption. This operation was carried out as I have said all over the city and all at the same time, with the result that hundreds of packages were destroyed that evening and not one member of the W.S. & P.U. taking part was caught. Our militancy in Scotland, as in England, took many forms such as the smashing of plate glass windows, going into art galleries and even attempts to burn down castles and other stately homes.³⁰

Stephen's focus on the excitement she felt carrying out these attacks, as well as her seeming pride in how well planned they were, emphasises her commitment to the militant campaign for women's suffrage at the time. This shows there was space for working-class women in the campaign, despite King's claim that such women were not involved in the Scottish militant action.

Much like Elizabeth Thomson, Stephen portrays her witnessing of Emmeline Pankhurst speaking about the suffrage campaign as an influential moment, particularly since the meeting in Glasgow, as Stephen describes it, was raided by the police and required Pankhurst to hide herself in a laundry basket to evade capture and reimprisonment under the Cat and Mouse Act. Stephen names Pankhurst as "our leader",³¹ reinforcing her commitment to the WSPU and to the campaign for women's voting rights. Shortly after this event Stephen decided to move from Glasgow to London since, as a known political activist, she was finding it difficult to gain employment in Scotland. In England she worked for the Domestic Workers' Union and then, after a brief return to Scotland, was employed by Sylvia Pankhurst to do organisational work for her Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF), formerly the East London Federation of Suffragettes. The WSF was formed by Sylvia Pankhurst as a pacifist response to the WSPU and what Elizabeth Crawford describes as "the extremist pro-war stand taken by [Sylvia Pankhurst's] mother and sister".³²

As early as 1913 there had been a split in the Pankhurst family. While her sister Christabel, a key leader of the WSPU at that time, was concentrating her efforts on raising publicity for the women's suffrage cause, Sylvia had become increasingly involved with the socialist and labour movement, and this change in focus caused tensions within the family. As Barbara Winslow has detailed, Christabel was concerned that Sylvia "was always thinking for herself and acting on her ideas, a trait that made her incompatible with the WSPU".³³ According to Sylvia, Christabel claimed that: "a working women's movement was of no value: working women were the weakest portion of the sex: how could it be otherwise? Their lives were too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the contest".³⁴ Sylvia and her East London

branch were then expelled from the WSPU which led to the formation of a separate entity, the East London Federation of Suffragettes.

In her memoir Stephen describes how her first assignment of knocking on doors in Hackney to recruit WSF branch members was dispiriting, with most members of the public she encountered being uninterested. She notes that it "was not an exciting baptism in my new career".³⁵ It is unsurprising that Jessie Stephen chose to align herself with the far-left politics of the WSF due to her lifelong association with the Independent Labour Party and her firm socialist views. It is interesting, however, to note that Stephen saw this work with less fortunate sections of society to be just as vital a part of her life as her militant campaigning for the vote, and she spent an equal amount of time discussing both types of activism in her memoir. This, alongside her decision to spend a great deal of her adult life living in England, suggests that perhaps Jessie Stephen's outsider status in the history of the women's suffrage movement, with her memoir as yet unpublished and her name not particularly well-known, is not in fact due to her Scottish roots but instead because of her dedication to socialist causes inspired by her own working class background. Like Sylvia Pankhurst, Stephen's mission to help working-class people separated her from those in organisations such as the WSPU whose only focus was to gain the vote for women. Unlike Sylvia, however, Stephen herself came from a working-class family and struggled with her finances throughout her life. It was not as unusual as one might think for women of Stephen's background to be involved in the suffrage campaign. It was, however, far more difficult for them to participate, and it had a different impact on their lives compared with their middle- and upper-class counterparts, since greater sacrifices had to be made. In their book on the contribution to the suffrage movement of working women from Lancashire, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris note that

Middle-class women could always rely on servants to provide their families with regular meals and look after the children. Working-class women had no such safety net, and their absence from home, however brief, revealed how vital was their contribution to the family economy.³⁶

Therefore, because of the risks to their families' lives, working-class women tended to participate less in activities which were risky and which therefore drew public attention and possible criminal conviction, such as window breaking. Thus, the efforts of working-class women has not been remembered in the same way as women who had less to lose with regard to their families and finances and therefore could give more of themselves to the campaign for women's suffrage. Jessie Stephen was a rare exception. As Leah Leneman notes, she is one of the few working-class suffrage campaigners who is somewhat well-known while "all but a handful remain in the shadows".³⁷ Unlike the women to whom family came first, Stephen never married nor had children. She gave her entire life to political activism, and in particular to her attempts to help the working class, as she did with her work for the WSF.

Stephen did go on to enjoy working for the WSF, despite her disappointing beginning knocking on doors, but is not particularly complimentary in her autobiography about Sylvia Pankhurst. She gives various examples of when Sylvia went against committee decisions and claims that : "Sylvia Pankhurst could disarm by her charm when she liked, but at the core she was hard as nails and rather inclined to be as autocratic as her mother".³⁸ Stephen also

describes problems encountered due to the ongoing First World War, noting that: "the war introduced many complications. Detectives attended all meetings and took shorthand notes of the speeches. Ugly incidents were all part of the hazards of pacifist propaganda".³⁹ However, Stephen's experience of working at the WSF, while not easy, prepared her for a lifelong career of political campaigning.

In 1917 Stephen left her post at the WSF to work as a political organiser in Bermondsey, south London, for the Independent Labour Party, of which she had been a member since her childhood. Having been involved in campaign publicity for several ILP by-election candidates, Stephen was elected as a Labour councillor for Bermondsey in 1922 and was made vice-chairperson of the health committee and a member of the housing committee. She stood as a Labour candidate for Portsmouth in several General Elections but did not win a seat. In 1944 Stephen was elected Union Area Organiser for Bristol of the National Union of Clerks and in 1948 she joined the management committee of the Bristol Co-operative Society. In 1957 Stephen was the first female to be elected chair of the Corporate Estates Committee in Bristol. Her memoir ends rather abruptly, with a note on the importance of voluntary political work as a means to "serve their fellow citizens".⁴⁰

Elizabeth Thomson and Jessie Stephen's unpublished memoirs are quite different in tone and content. Thomson's focuses very much on a straightforward account of the facts of her life, giving many dates and locations to allow the reader to form an accurate timeline. Stephen's is instead more concerned with emotions and anecdotes, giving few firm dates but plenty of colourful and personal stories, such as an account of a Canadian man who sent her "the most ardent billet-doux"⁴¹ after a brief encounter. Discussing the autobiography of Mary Richardson, Hilda Kean has noted that Richardson's memoir, like others of its kind, does not include such overtly personal and candid writing: "in common with much suffrage autobiography there is very little mention of a life outside a public political domain"⁴². This further differentiates Stephen's unpublished autobiography from those which have attracted more critical attention.

Textually, Thomson's autobiography is unusual and interesting, if a little clunky to read, due to her frequent use of the plural pronoun "we" to describe the joint activities of herself and her sister. This is not a common mode of first-person narrative; as the literary critic Uri Margolin notes, it is "so rare"⁴³ a format, due to the difficulty in portraying "solidarity, unity, distinctness, sharing"⁴⁴ in a stylish way. As Margolin puts it: "the payoff may simply not be worth the effort".⁴⁵ Perhaps then what Thomson's memoir lacks in readability it makes up for in the ambition of its author's attempt to portray the unity and community spirit of the campaign for women's suffrage through her writing style. Furthermore, Thomson's many references to female doctors and professionals feels like an intentional promotion of the important work women were doing. Stephen too uses her memoir to promote the women around her, mentioning many female campaigners with whom she interacts or whose work she admires. She also devotes a great deal of her life story to accounts of the poor conditions and inequalities in pay and in treatment which women continued to suffer in the workplace. Thus, it is clear that both Stephen and Thomson's memoirs are not only fascinating first-person insights into the suffrage campaign, but the memoirs also provide important records of the history of the fight for women's suffrage in

Scotland and of Scottish women campaigning in England. A key difference between the two, however, is their dates of production. Neither has a firm date attached to its archive record but from the events described, as well as the date of her death, it is clear that Thomson's was completed shortly before she died in 1918. Stephen, on the other hand, who was much younger than Thomson when she took part in the WSPU, recounts many other events in her life over subsequent decades and it is likely, therefore, that her memoir was not finished until the 1970s. Thus, while Thomson was writing the story of her life as a suffragette during the very time of the struggle, there was a greater distance between the writing of Stephen's memoir and the time when she was campaigning. Her account is therefore more reflective, including both the dull errands of militancy – such as knocking on doors to collect supporters – as well as the dramatically violent incidents.

The close proximity of Thomson's autobiography to the campaigning which it describes, with no time for reflection and contemplation, perhaps goes some way to explaining its somewhat stilted delivery which makes for an awkward narrative style. It also explains her focus on specific events, such as the Black Friday incidents, rather than the overall outcomes of campaigning. Nonetheless, the immediacy of Thomson's memoir should surely have earned it a place as a vital document of women's history since it is one of the very few suffrage memoirs written at the time of the campaign, by someone who did not know if the cause they were fighting for would ever be achieved. Although Jessie Stephen's memoir was completed much later, at a time when universal suffrage had been agreed and indeed she herself had stood for political office, her working-class background, candid writing style and detailed descriptions of militant action suggest that her autobiography should be a vital text in women's political history. Both Stephen's and Thomson's memoirs present, in several different ways, a perspective from outside of the typical suffrage story.

With Thomson's memoir in a university archive, rarely visited by those outside of academic institutions, and Stephen's in a niche archive of working-class political memorabilia due to her Independent Labour Party ties, neither are particularly accessible to the wider public despite the vital importance of the perspectives they provide. Emmeline Pankhurst's *My Own Story* has recently been republished by Penguin with a cover design that ties it to Sarah Gavron's and Abi Morgan's 2015 *Suffragette* film, suggesting it was influential in the writing of the film, as well as that it has the potential to sell copies. Stephen and Thomson's efforts might be just as insightful as Pankhurst's memoir, and perhaps more interesting as they provide a perspective from outside the mainstream, but it is simply that Emmeline Pankhurst continues to be well-known. The problem then is that Elizabeth Thomson and Jessie Stephen's memoirs, as with much of women's personal writings, have only a small readership. Unless this is widened historical studies will continue to focus on the small group of more well-known suffrage campaigners and their autobiographies.

Deborah Withers has discussed the inaccessibility of women's historical artefacts in her 2015 monograph *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission*

Early on in my engagement with feminist archives, I learnt a key lesson: that the existence and organisation of materials is only one (but of course a crucial) part

of the political struggle. If the vast-ness of feminism's already-there is to be accessed and mobilised, they have to be actively and deliberately transmitted.⁴⁶

The "already-there" to which she refers is Withers' term for the generic information on women's history, be it a book or an item in a museum, which is readily available in museums, archives, libraries, and even on the internet. Withers believes that these items cannot be left to be found, they must be, as stated above, deliberately transmitted. She uses an example of the 1977 proposed sale of the Fawcett Library's collection to London School of Economics, who were planning to keep only "those parts they deemed important and could enter into the Dewey decimal system and discarding the rest".⁴⁷ Although the collection is now known as the Women's Library and has been housed at London School of Economics since 2013, the purchase was blocked in 1977 by a vote of Fawcett Society members, who chose instead to sell the collection to City Polytechnic where it could be kept together. This decision by the members suggests that the Dewey classification system, which has fixed and limited classes in which to categorise material, was not flexible enough to house much of the collection, which is not only books but archive and museum objects such as photographs and jewellery. Because it would not fit inside the prescribed classifications, which were designed for more traditional (and overwhelmingly male produced) historical library items, these artefacts of women's history would have been lost had a campaign not kept the collection whole.⁴⁸ However, it raises the point that while the Fawcett Library's collection represents a large (although of course not comprehensive) part of English women's history which can be researched and viewed in one place, there is no comparative single collection of Scottish women's and suffrage history. The items and literature of the Scottish suffrage campaigners is scattered around universities, museums, and libraries, and not necessarily in Scotland, as is the case with Jessie Stephen's memoir which is in Manchester's Working Class Movement Library. With the "already-there" as Withers defines it of Scottish suffrage history fragmented, it is perhaps difficult for those who are interested to locate the information they desire.⁴⁹ This then gives the impression that there was no Scottish contingent of the suffrage movement, or that it was lesser than its English counterpart, with no structure or cohesion, which keeps Thomson and Stephen from getting the recognition they deserve for the record of their lives and political activism.

It is clear then that the focus on women's political histories of the metropolitan elite has excluded many significant voices, be those elderly, regional, socialist, working class or indeed many more that have not yet been explored at all. Jessie Stephen stated in *Spare Rib* in the 1970s that she believed books on suffrage histories were lacking in their portrayal of the diversity of the women's suffrage movement and sadly this has not been fully rectified even now as we enter the centenary of women achieving limited suffrage. Thankfully, languishing unpublished in archives, catalogued incorrectly due to a restrictive categorising system, unfindable in online searches, are the stories which address these omissions. Jessie Stephen's *Submission is for Slaves* and Elizabeth Thomson's *The Life Story of Miss Elizabeth Thomson* are surely just the beginning.

Notes

¹ Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1995), p. 1.

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- ² Leah Leneman, *The Scottish Suffragettes* (Edinburgh: NMS Publishing Limited, 2000), p. 7.
- ³ Hilda Kean, 'Some Problems of Constructing and Reconstructing a Suffragette's Life: Mary Richardson, Suffragette, Socialist and Fascist' *Women's History Review* (Vol. 7, No. 4, 1998), pp. 475-493 (p. 475).
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- ¹³ Thomson, p. 16.
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- ³⁸ Stephen, p. 75.
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- ⁴⁰ Stephen, p. 198.
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⁴³ Uri Margolin, 'Telling Our Story: On "We" Literary Narratives' *Language and Literature*, 5.2 (1996): pp. 115-133 (p. 132).

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⁴⁶ Deborah Withers, *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission: Theory, Practice and Cultural Heritage* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p. 6.

⁴⁷ Withers, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Withers, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Deborah Withers uses her example of the restrictive nature of the Dewey decimal system to illustrate how archives do not necessarily do well to promote the "already-there" of women's history. Problems I have encountered in archives have included documents on the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies incorrectly categorised as "suffragette" items, and court records which are tagged with only the names of the more well-known activists involved in the criminal case.

Gemma Elliott is a PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow. She holds an MLitt in Modernities from the same university, during which her research focused on the role of suffrage campaigners in the fiction of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf. Currently, her doctoral research looks at Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* novel sequence as autobiographical fiction. More broadly, her research interests focus on feminist and modernist texts.

School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
g.elliott.1@research.gla.ac.uk

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