

The PEOPLE'S Voice

Scottish Political Poetry, Song and the Franchise, 1832–1918

Anthology

Poems selected and annotated by:

Professor Kirstie Blair, University of Strathclyde

Professor Gerard Carruthers, University of Glasgow

Erin Farley, University of Strathclyde

Dr Catriona M. M. Macdonald, University of Glasgow

Dr Honor Rieley, University of Glasgow

Dr Michael Shaw, University of Kent

**Part Four: Poems relating to the Representation
of the People Act, 1918**

37. Regrets.

This is one of numerous political poems published in Aberdeen in 1908, when a high-profile election was held in the city to choose the rector of Aberdeen University. The candidates for this role were the reigning prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, and his parliamentary rival, the Unionist Edward Carson. The suffragettes despised Asquith, whom they saw as a traitor, and they agitated across the country to undermine his premiership; there is even evidence to suggest that some suffragettes were planning to assassinate him.¹ This concerted effort to challenge Asquith is reflected in the Aberdeen rectorial election campaign, where the suffragettes of Aberdeen got behind Asquith's opponent, Carson. The poem appears in the only known issue of *The Suffragette*, a magazine published by the Aberdeen University Woman's Suffrage Association. Asquith is the speaker of this poem, and he is branded a disloyal hypocrite. The parodic voice of Asquith states that he wishes he had got women on his side during the election campaign, as they were a substantial demographic, and he also scolds himself for forgetting the repercussions of betraying the suffragettes.

Michael Shaw

Air—"Sir Solomon Levi."

My name is H. H. Asquith,
And I live at Downing Street,
It's there I change my arguments
To cover my retreat.
I've second-handed principles,
And everything in that line,
Yet all the men who vote for me
Are a hundred and fifty-nine.

I hoped I once would Rector be,
In far-north Aberdeen;
But now my hope is turned to fear,
I dream what might have been.
I wish I'd got the women's vote,
It would have seen me through;
But they complain that my support
Of them was far from true.

They know when voters come to me,
Their grievances to air,
However dull they seem to be,
I offer them a chair.
And when I've listened wearily
To what they had to say,
I claim it is my chiefest care,
I don't send votes away.

¹ Neil Tweedie, 'Suffragette "plot to assassinate Asquith"', *The Telegraph*, 29 September 2006.

I wish I'd met the women so,
When justice was their plea,
Not left them standing on the step
Till I had time to flee.
Men say they have ability
And would have worked for me;
But foolishly I did not see
That they would voters be.

Yet I hear that of the women,
There are three will vote for me,
They are Flora Laura, Little Dick,
And a second T.C.B.
I'll take their votes with pleasure,
But I can have no respect
For their intelligence, who'd try
A foeman to elect.

The Suffragette, 28 October 1908.

38. Carson's Farewell to Aberdeen.

Unlike the previous poem, 'Regrets' (written by suffragettes to mock the prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, who was a candidate in the 1908 Aberdeen University rectorial election), this poem is written by a supporter of Asquith, and it attacks the prime minister's rival in that election – the Unionist, Edward Carson. This poem was published in *The Premier*, an Aberdeen journal established as a herald for the campaign to install Asquith as rector. In this poem, which is set to the tune of Robert Burns's 'Ae Fond Kiss', Carson is portrayed addressing his supporters, Unionists and suffragettes, after losing the rectorial election. The poem gleefully anticipates the failure of the Carson campaign, and it casts Carson as weak and melodramatic. Carson states that he regrets his candidature and Asquith is portrayed as 'too strong for me to fight with'.

Michael Shaw

(To the tune of "Ae Fond Kiss.")

Unionists, we now must sever!
Suffragettes, farewell for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge ye,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage ye.

Who shall say that Fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerfu' twinkle lights me;
Dark despair around benights me.

Now I mourn my candidature—
Solely due to my good-nature;
Lansdowne, Milner—both declined it:²
Why, Saint Patrick! did I mind it?

Had I ne'er consented blindly
To their plan, proposed sae kindly,—
Erin, ne'er from thee departed,
I had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Fare thee well, victorious Asquith!—
Far too strong for me to fight with!
May the Liberal Lord Rector
Prove the 'Varsity's Protector!

Unionists, we now must sever!
Suffragettes, farewell for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge ye,

² Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne (1845-1927); Alfred Milner, 1st Viscount Milner (1854-1925).

Warring sighs and groans I'll wage ye.

The Premier, 30 June 1908.

39. [Green grow the rashes O]

In 1914 two suffragettes, Frances Parker and Ethel Moorhead, attempted to bomb Robert Burns's birthplace cottage in Alloway. Although this attack was widely characterised as an assault against Burns personally, there is little evidence to suggest that the suffragettes felt any antagonism towards him. In fact, suffragettes like Helen Crawford styled his poem 'The Rights of Woman' as proto-suffragette, while 'Scots Wha Hae' was frequently sung by Scottish suffragettes at processions. This comical poem, which appropriates Burns's 'Green Grow the Rashes O', was published in the Glasgow socialist newspaper *Forward*, which was broadly supportive of the suffrage cause: it frequently published articles by Sylvia Pankhurst, and it ran a regular column by Janie Allan, a prominent Glaswegian suffragette and socialist who was known for encouraging hunger strikes in prisons. The poem comments on the suffragette's signature militant tactic: window smashing. The speaker of the poem sardonically implores the reader to give votes to women, in order to stop their violence; we are told that their violence may soon escalate if their demands are not met. Although comical, and not especially supportive of the suffragettes themselves, the poem does wittily highlight the fact that extending the franchise to women would end the vandalism. The poem is attributed to *Votes for Women*, one of the leading London suffragette newspapers; the author, T. E. J., is unidentified.

Michael Shaw

Green grow the rashes O,
Bang go the glasses O,
We have no pane, dear Mother, now,
Within our window sashes O.

For guid's sake gi'e the lasses Votes,
Or onything they fancy O,
Or they will soon be at our throats,
They're gettin' maist unchancy O.
Green grow the rashes O,
Another window crashes O,
'Twere better far to gi'e them votes
Than thole sic awfu' bashes O!

T. E. J. in *Votes for Women*.

Forward, 1 March 1913.

40. The Suffragette's Nut Cracked.

Much of the poetry on the suffragettes takes a clear stance on the debate regarding votes for women, but we find ambivalent poetry too. Many of the suffragette-inspired poems in the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, for instance, are conflicted on the 'votes for women' issue. This poem focuses on a local Edinburgh suffragette, Lady Steel (Barbara Joanna Paterson Steel) who stood for Edinburgh Council (St Stephen's Ward) following the death of the councillor, Baillie Clark. The poem begins with a complimentary tone towards Steel and the suffragette cause, appearing to share Lady Steel's position that the Council is 'devious' and that it can only be cured by 'admit[ting] the female section'. The speaker also states that women, through their knowledge of children, will be better able to explain the infant mortality rate. But by the end of the poem, the speaker becomes more conservative, noting that the best way women can 'bless the earth' is by influencing men for good, by remaining 'by the hearth'. The poem reflects the complexity and ambivalence of feeling that some people had towards the 'votes for women' campaign.

Michael Shaw

The Council in its devious ways
From right to wrong for ever strays,
The reason why? At last we know—
Did Lady Steel last night not show?

Before the Council reach perfection,
They must admit the female section.
'Tis curious how this simple plan
Ne'er dawned upon the mind of man.

Guid faith! To make a free confession,
The public long had the impression—
When reading o'er their silly speeches—
They were just women wearing breeches.

But, oh! what can a lady know
'Bout sweeping streets or clearing snow
Or water and electric mains,
Our cable cars and sewage drains?

But, then, she kens about the weans,
'Bout wives and maidens' aches and pains;
She'll quickly tell the reason why
The infant death-rate is so high?

How children should be clothed and fed,
How to be washed and put to bed;
Give information, greatly prized,
Of how all germs are sterilised!

No doubt when ladies there appear,
The moral atmosphere will clear,
Be of [indeciph.] to smell and hearing,
From smoke and drink and vulgar swearing.

Men must be in a waefu' plight,
When women weak can put them right—
For do our churchmen not now say,
"Twas woman first led man astray."

When she her equal rights has won,
Will she not find her prestige gone?
*For [indeciph.] where [indeciph] strive,*³
The strongest only can survive.

What can soft-hearted woman do?
If she's to fight with such a crew;
Her sighs and tears would be in vain;
For man, rude man, the prize *will* gain.

If women want to bless the earth
Their power infinite's by the hearth;
Man's every influence for good
Is found in wife and sisterhood.

— Tra Quair.

Edinburgh Evening Dispatch, 31 October 1907.

³ The print quality of this issue deteriorates towards the bottom of the page, making this line indecipherable. It might read, '*For favours, where the masses strive*'.

41. The Great Demonstration.

On 9 October 1909, a large historical pageant was staged on the streets of Edinburgh to campaign for women's suffrage. The pageant was organised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and led by Flora Drummond, a prominent suffragette from Arran who was commonly referred to as 'the General' by fellow suffragettes. The pageant featured floats, which presented various key historical Scottish women, including Queen Margaret and Mary Queen of Scots. This iconic event inspired 'The Great Demonstration', a poem which appears on a page of the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* alongside several large photographs from the 'Suffragette Pageant'. The poem is largely descriptive and broadly neutral in its presentation of the suffragettes. It begins by recounting a conventional morning and then moves on to describe a 'spoor' of suffragettes, who cover the Burghmuir links. The poem notes the various different types of women who participated and comments on their banners (as well as their colours: green, white and purple – the colours of the WSPU). The reference to 'Mrs Spankhurst' reflects a mocking tone towards the suffragettes that can be found in several *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* poems.

Michael Shaw

A Fragment.

(From the collection of Mrs Spankhurst.)

The morn of Ninth October broke
'Mid clouds of murky city smoke,
And in their courses like the stars
Began to run the city cars,
 Pulled by a cable strong;
Which never jolts or breaks or jars
 Except when things go wrong.

Fair Princes Street awoke to life,
 And active business men
Left bed and breakfast, child and wife,
 To reach their desks by ten;
And soon the busy forenoon passed
Like autumn leaves on winter blast.

Meanwhile the links at Burghmuir
Were getting covered with the spoor
Of Suffragettes, who formed in ranks,
Intending soon to stretch their shanks
 By marching into town.

All sorts and shapes were gathered there,
The young, the old, the fat, the spare;
Their blooming cheeks and tresses gay
Seemed newly done-up for the day,
 Their boots were black and brown.

High overhead their banner flies
Its bilious pattern to the skies,
The white their innocence denotes
 And gentle winning ways;
The green their plans for getting votes
 And shrinking from men's gaze;
While in the purple you may spy
The hue that clouds the brow or eye,
 Which these fair women smite.

The woman who those colours chose
Mayhap was thinking of her woes,
Or thought to mortify her foes,
Or match the colours of her hose,
 Or maybe she was tight.
But banner like to it, I ween,
Was ne'er by mortal herald seen.

Edinburgh Evening Dispatch, 11 October 1909.

42. Shakespeare Up To Date.

Because most newspapers in the early twentieth century either backed the Liberal or Tory parties, which were both broadly opposed to 'votes for women', suffragettes created their own magazines and newspapers to publish articles and verse. For instance, several university suffrage societies produced their own magazines, and these are often fruitful sources for suffragette poetry. This particular poem, which is also a dramatic sketch, appears in *Jus Suffragii Alumnae*, the magazine of the Queen Margaret College Suffrage Society (Glasgow). Dr Marion Gilchrist, the first female graduate of the University of Glasgow, was the Honorary President of the society at this time. This poem, which becomes a poetic conversation between three suffragettes, appropriates *Macbeth*, specifically the 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' soliloquy. The speaker of the first section of the sketch calls for the Liberals (towards whom the suffragettes were especially hostile) to get 'Out, out', as their promises are 'shadows void of substance'; their words are 'full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing'. The three suffragettes who stand in for the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* converse as they wait in a square near Westminster, discussing how they can trouble Asquith, the Liberal prime minister, and prevent him from sleeping.

Michael Shaw

Awaiting the Passing of the Bill.

TO-MORROW, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of the session's time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted bills
The way to dusty death. Out, out, false Liberals!
Your promises are shadows, void of substance,
That strut their hour upon your Lib'ral platforms
And then are heard no more. Yea, they are tales
Told by false quibblers, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing!

SCENE—A Square near Westminster.

THUNDER—Enter three Suffragettes.

First Suffragette—Where has thou been, sister?

Second Suffragette— Doing time.

Third Suffragette—Sister, where thou?

First Suffragette—The Commons were discussing votes for women

And talked and talked and talked. Give me, quoth I:

Aroint thee, pest! th' ill-mannered crew replied.

Now Asquith's gone to Downing Street, Master o' the Cabinet,

But in a bus I'll thither ride

And with two staunch friends by my side

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

Second Suffragette—I'll give him my mind.

First Suffragette—Thou'rt kind.

Third Suffragette—And I.

First Suffragette—I myself take all the bother.

We will make his troubles grow!
From every quarter shall they blow
I' the shipman's card.
I will draw him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his pent house lid;
He shall live a man forbid
Weary se'nnights nine times nine
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:
On his doorstep aye shall float
A tempestuous petticoat.

F. M. N.

Jus Suffragii Alumnae, January 1909.

43. [Newington Butts were lively]

Many suffragettes were imprisoned for their militant actions, and several wrote poetry in their cells, which they 'smuggled' from prison. This poem appears in *Holloway Jingles*, a collection of poems written by militant suffragettes serving sentences in Holloway Prison during March and April 1912 for smashing windows in Central London. These poems were later compiled by a Glaswegian inmate, Nancy A. John, and published by the Glasgow branch of the WSPU (the militant Women's Social and Political Union). This poem is by Dr Alice Stewart Ker, a Scottish physician educated in Dublin who often went under the alias of Jane Warton. She was also a supporter of the temperance movement and became involved in the Theosophical Society. Ker was released early from her sentence in Holloway Prison, which was either due to illness or forcible feeding. The poem recounts Ker's trial by jury and it depicts the judge, 'Justice Lawrie'. The speaker states that 'The lies piled up like snow drifts' and implies that the judge was biased. The poem is set to the song 'Annie Laurie', a Scottish song believed to have been written by William Douglas.

Michael Shaw

Tune—Annie Laurie.

Newington Butts were lively,
When session's time fell due,
For there sat Justice Lawrie,
With twelve good men and true:
And sat to sentence me—
And except for Justice Lawrie,
I'd be far away and free.

The lies piled up like snow drifts,
The women's case looked wan;
Their answers were the bravest
That e'er judge frowned upon:
And a biassed judge was he—
And except for Justice Lawrie,
I'd be far away and free.

Hear the Jew as witness lying,
Measuring damages in feet;
And to hear the owner sighing,
When it proves too much, is sweet.
And all the world can see,
That except for Justice Lawrie,
I'd be far away and free.

—Dr. Alice Ker.

Holloway Jingles, (Glasgow: WSPU, 1912).

44. Full Tide.

Like the preceding poem by Alice Ker, this poem appears in *Holloway Jingles*. Ker travelled to London to participate in the window smashing campaign like several other Scottish suffragettes, including Helen Crawford and the author of this poem, A. A. Wilson, who also contributed a second poem to *Holloway Jingles*, 'An End'. 'Full Tide' heralds the fact that 'the tide has turned' and attempts to encourage this change: 'Oh rising tide, flow in!'. This image is most likely an allegory for the rise of women's rights; indeed, the tide is feminised by being compared to a 'bosom'. A boatman is also depicted: he has to find a new place to moor his vessel, suggesting that men will have to change and adapt to the new tide.

Michael Shaw

The tide has turned—Oh, rising tide, flow in!
As snow upon the far horizon blue
I see the crested waves in long outline,
And soon the silver glitter of sunshine,
Shall shimmer on the surfaces near to.
The tide has turned—Oh rising tide, flow in!

The tide has turned—Oh rising tide, flow in!
The edges of the gently lifting levels
Make lengthened arcs along the gold sands pouring.
Hark, boatman! higher up thy craft needs mooring,
An thou wouldst save it from encroaching revels.
The tide has turned—Oh rising tide, flow in!

Oh full tide flowing high— roll in, roll in!
No need to meet it, o'er the hills 'tis rimming
Higher and higher yet, its waters welling,
All obstacles are swept into its swelling,
And out to sea upon its bosom brimming
The eager boats have gone—Oh flowing tide roll on!
—A. A. Wilson.

Holloway Jingles, (Glasgow: WSPU, 1912), p.20.

45. Women Shall be Free

Helen Crawford was a Glaswegian suffragette who later became a prominent member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and a town councillor for Dunoon. She was a highly active suffragette who participated in the same window smashing campaign that led to the publication of *Holloway Jingles*. Although Crawford does not appear to have contributed to *Holloway Jingles*, she saw poetry and song as key tools for the suffragettes. In her autobiography, which has been digitised by the Marx Memorial Library, she highlights her appreciation for Robert Burns and the fact that she encouraged fellow suffragettes to sing 'Scots Wha Hae' when agitating. The poem below, which appears in a suffragette convention programme, is evidence that she also wrote political songs, and this one offers a rallying cry for suffragettes. The poem's refrain stresses that the call for women's enfranchisement is a 'just demand' and that the suffragettes will not back down until 'women shall be free'. The poem also explains the logic behind the suffragettes' position: women are portrayed as hard workers who are also capable of holding high office – Queen Victoria is held up as a woman who has 'graced our country's throne / For half-a-hundred years'. The concluding stanza instructs suffragettes to put pressure on those who have made 'pledges' to them.

Michael Shaw

A good heart and a steady mind,
Our purpose clear in view,
The whole wide world shall understand
What women mean to do.
And have they fixed the when and where,
And what is women's place?
Just what we can and will, no less,
To benefit our race.
And shall they scorn our just demand,
And shall we voteless be?
To spread our cause, we shall not pause,
Till women shall be free.

What do they fear, who hold them back,
Who number half the race?
That we the needful courage lack
To fill a worthy place.
The sex that toils in home and mill,
That shares their smiles and fears,
The sex that graced our country's throne
For half-a-hundred years.
And shall they scorn our just demand,
And shall we voteless be?
To spread our cause, we shall not pause,
Till women shall be free.

What now of pledges freely made

For service freely given?
Now they who prospered by our aid
To action must be driven.
Then join, the women of our land
All eager for the fray—
With one and all and hand in hand,
And who shall bid us nay?
And shall they scorn our just demand,
And shall we voteless be?
To spread our cause, we shall not pause,
Till women shall be free.

46. The Monstrous Regiment of Women.

In a volume of poems (*Echoes of Strife*) that very much captures the sentiments of the Great War era, this poem is one of two that address the ways in which war impacted on women, the other being 'A Mother of Britain' (p. 27) that addresses the plight of mothers whose soldier sons had been lost in the war. While the 'Mother of Britain' would no doubt have been enfranchised in 1918, the younger women celebrated in 'The Monstrous Regiment' would have to wait until 1928. Rev. Walter Arnold Mursell of Coats Memorial Baptist Church (Paisley) published a number of poetry collections. In this poem Mursell evokes John Knox's famous treatise against female monarchs, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) to make a point at odds with Knox's scepticism. Mursell describes the ways in which women had played a full role in the war effort (e.g. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, est. 1917) and suggests that they were capable of responsibilities far beyond those thought appropriate in pre-war years.

Catriona M.M. Macdonald

Time was when maiden fair
Braided her golden hair,
Wondered what clothes to wear
 Each night and morning;
Feared lest she wet her feet,
Trembled a mouse to meet,
Hardly dared cross the street,
 Strict was her warning.

Now in her uniform,
Whether 'tis cold or warm,
Braves she both sun and storm,
 True to her station;
Gallantly grips her task,
No time to dream or bask,
Proud of the chance to ask
 Work for the Nation.

Whate'er the Country lacks
Maidens she has in packs,
Neatly she spreads the Waacs
 All the Land over;
From Thames to Golden Gate
Woman has grasped her Fate,
Eager, alert, elate,
 Venus turned Rover.

1918.

Walter A. Mursell, in *Echoes of Strife* (Paisley: J & R Parlane, 1919), pp.25–26.

47. Should Women Get The Vote?

Little is known of Isabella Forrest, other than through family accounts (preserved and shared by a relative in Australia, Katrina Giebels) which say that she was a working woman and the mother of an illegitimate child. She appears to have published her poems in the Banffshire press from around the 1880s to the 1920s: her collection, *Islaside Musings* (1926), was sponsored by the *Banffshire Journal*. This is an unusual poem in that we know of relatively few poems about female suffrage – especially poems critical of the plans for female suffrage – written by working-class women. The 1918 Act did not extend the vote to every woman, and in her striking opening lines, Forrest demands that it should do. The poem is both implicitly conservative in its suggestion that ‘woman’s sphere’ lies in the home (possibly a dig at suffragettes and their public actions), and radical in hinting at the ‘quenchless flame’, threatening to burst out, that lies within the heart of the honest and independent working woman. Forrest also suggests that the poor are not content but deeply resentful at their treatment. In ‘They know God never meant it’ she argues, not unusually for working-class poetry, that discriminating against and mistreating the poor is anti-Christian. Her solution is not that working women themselves should join the suffragettes’ fight, however, but that working men should win votes for women through the ballot box. In doing so, they will also free themselves from ‘the chains that bind you.’

Kirstie Blair

Should women get the envied vote?

I stoutly answer, No—

Unless the privilege extend

To lofty and to low.

A woman's sphere should be her home,

No matter what her station,

Those who have not even self-control,

How could they help the nation?

The poor man's wife in humble home

Must labour, toil and spin,

Yet be denied her right to claim

What rank alone can win.

Too long, alas! the poor have felt

The power of rank and station,

Been made but tools by blundering fools,

A prey to degradation.

Within the humble toiler's breast

Tho' pressed at every turn,

There smoulders still a quenchless flame,

That fain would burst and burn.

Of honest, independent mind,

How deeply they resent it,
One thought alone can lead them on,
They know God never meant it.

The Laird can get his wife a vote,
Place land and state upon her,
The true give heed but to the deed
That's justified by honour.

Go forward then, ye working men,
Let no false promise bind you,
Cast bribes aside, by right abide,
And break the chains that bind you.

When casting lots for women's votes,
One point be sure you aim at:
If rank and state the honour get,
The poor man's wife can claim it.

Isabella Forrest, *Islaside Musings* (1926), pp.37–38.