THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN SCOTLAND, 1867-1928: A LEARNING RESOURCE

SOURCES AT THE NATIONAL RECORDS OF SCOTLAND

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Following the launch of The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland, 1867-1928: A Learning Resource, members of the team who put the resource together were invited to give talks at the National Records of Scotland in August. Our talks at the NRS have drawn primarily, but not exclusively, on their records. This article outlines the most important NRS records relevant to my talk on the movement for women's suffrage in Scotland. There are three main collections of records which shed light on the Scottish movement: the Balfour family papers; police, court and prison records concerning suffragettes arrested and imprisoned in Scotland; and the records of the Edinburgh Women Citizens Association and Scottish Council of Women Citizens Associations. Other sources which shed light on lobbying for women's enfranchisement include an 1886 circular from the Edinburgh National Society for Women's Suffrage, and the papers of the Cabinet Equal Franchise Committee of 1926-1927.

The Edinburgh National Society for Women's Suffrage (ENSWS)

The Edinburgh society, set up in 1867, played an active role in encouraging the formation of committees in other parts of Scotland. By the early 1870s there were over 60 suffrage societies in Scotland, but unfortunately we know very little about these committees, what sort of lifespan they had, or how local supporters promoted the cause of women's suffrage in the 1870s and 1880s.

The NRS holds a copy of an ENSWS circular dating from 1886. It was sent to the Town Clerk of the burgh of Dornoch by ENSWS secretary, Eliza Kirkland, who, in her letter, indicated that a copy of a Bill for extending the Parliamentary Franchise to Women was also forwarded to him. She asked the Town Clerk to bring before Dornoch Council the request that the Council petition 'in favour of a measure which affects the interests of so considerable a proportion of their constituents.' She also informed him that the Edinburgh Town Council had already petitioned in favour of the Bill. The circular went on to indicate that by the terms of the Bill, 21 'Women now on the List of Burgesses for the borough' of Dornoch 'would be entitled to be placed on the Register of

Parliamentary electors for the district'. The form of the circular and handwritten insertions of 'Dornoch' and '21' suggests that an analysis had probably been done for other burghs and similar letters with numbers of women burgesses had been sent.

The Balfour archive - correspondence of Lady Frances Balfour

Among the Balfour papers lodged at the NRS are the extensive correspondence of various members of the family, including Lady Frances Balfour, who was an active suffragist. The archive also contains Lady Frances’ diaries and other related materials, such as newspaper cuttings, and a memorial of Lady Frances. Frances Balfour, née Campbell, was the daughter of the 8th Duke of Argyll. She married Eustace Balfour, brother of Arthur Balfour, who became leader of the Conservative party, and Prime Minister from 1902-1905. As a member of a political family with a tradition of service in government, colonial administration, and the army, Frances was a Whig in politics, although, opposed to Irish Home Rule, she became a Liberal Unionist. The Argyll family seat was in Inveraray, while the Balfour family seat was in Whittingehame in East Lothian, and in the manner of other élite Scots who were embedded in British ruling circles, Frances moved between Scottish and London homes. Through politics, family connections and marriages, as well as social life, she was well connected to political circles in both Liberal and Tory parties. She was a regular attender of House of Commons debates, taking her place behind the grille in the Ladies Gallery.

The archive is extensive, but as it is well catalogued, the letters in which Frances Balfour refers to her suffrage activities are straightforward to identify. The references to suffrage campaigning are often short snippets, however, referring briefly to what she is doing, such as speaking at meetings, giving lectures, and so on, although they also give insight into her views about others: Millicent Fawcett, whom she admired; the suffragettes, whose tactics she criticised; and the anti-suffragists, whom she mocked. Furthermore, given that all her life she was part of prominent political circles, her letters provide an insight into women's engagement with political issues and the emerging party organisations which women were able to join - the Primrose League, the Women's Liberal Unionist Association, the Scottish Women Liberals' Federation.

The recent biography by Joan Huffman, Lady Frances: Frances Balfour, Aristocrat Suffragist (Matador, 2018) draws extensively on the Balfour archive, and, organised chronologically, can usefully act as a guide to many of the items of Frances' correspondence relevant to the suffrage cause. In addition, although it has tended to be Lady Frances that has been the focus of Scottish historians' interest because of her engagement in campaigning in Scotland and support for the Scottish Churches League for Woman Suffrage, the archive is revealing about the networks in which Frances’ sister-in-law, Lady Betty Balfour functioned, and her wide ranging contacts, including with Beatrice Webb and Olive Schreiner. Frances Balfour also published a biography of Elsie Inglis and a memoir, which both add to her accounts of women's political lives and of the suffrage campaign. The archival material at the NRS could also be usefully complemented by following up accounts of her talks and addresses at public meetings in newspapers and in suffrage journals, and by tracking down articles she published in journals such as the Westminster Gazette.
Suffragettes: arrests, court cases, and imprisonment

The period of militancy began in 1903 with the formation in Manchester by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) - it moved its headquarters to London in 1906. The first branch of the WSPU in Scotland appears to have been set up by late 1905 in Glasgow, and subsequently there were also branches in Edinburgh, Dundee, and Aberdeen. The WSPU was not the only militant organisation. In 1907, the Women's Freedom League (WFL) was established by former WSPU organiser Teresa Billington [later Billington-Greig], who distanced herself from the tactics of the Pankhursts, and declared herself and the organisation non-violent militants. The WFL had branches in Scotland - in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen, and elsewhere. Another WSPU organiser, Helen Fraser, left in 1908, protesting the use of violence, and joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The WFL's tactics included non-payment of tax, and refusing to take part in the 1911 census, a tactic also taken up by WSPU members. While there were disagreements over violent tactics, there was also co-operation between the WSPU, WFL and NUWSS in holding large demonstrations demanding the vote, and in organising local meetings. According to Martin Pugh there were 10 WSPU branches in Scotland in 1907, but most of these were 'carried off' by the WFL breakaway, leaving only three branches by 1912.

Historians Leah Leneman and Norman Watson have already drawn on the extensive NRS records on suffragette activities, indicating in particular what happened to women who were arrested and imprisoned. Where militants were arrested, on imprisonment they demanded to be treated as political prisoners, and some went on hunger strike. This led to the Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act (1913) [Cat-and-Mouse Act], with women being released due to deteriorating health resulting from hunger strikes, and then re-imprisoned when their health improved. Ultimately, the approach adopted towards hunger strikers was force-feeding. The records held at the NRS include records of trials, prison records, reports and related correspondence, press cuttings, files relating to Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest in Glasgow in 1914 and her complaints about police brutality, papers about bomb outrages and security issues, and so on. The harsh treatment women received has been a common focus of historical accounts. But there also other aspects of this experience that could be explored.

Among the NRS records is a list of those women arrested in Scotland - 26 in total (although according to Norman Watson this is not comprehensive, nor does it include Scots women who were arrested and imprisoned in England). In many cases we do not know much about the women concerned. Only a few are well-known, such as Ethel Moorhead, Arabella Scott, Helen Crawfurd and Fanny Parker, and even in their cases we by no means have full biographical accounts, although their suffrage activism is usefully summarised in the New Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women. In our learning resource we have included the list compiled by Leah Leneman of suffragette attacks in Scotland. On the one hand this may not be comprehensive, but on the other some attacks were attributed to suffragettes without there being any direct evidence or proof, and in the majority of cases no arrests were made. These cases would merit more investigation, though it seems likely that most cases would remain unsolved.
By the period of militancy, it had become the practice of several suffrage organisations, militant and non-militant, to have paid organisers, and some of those arrested and imprisoned also functioned as paid organisers at some point. Some of the key militants were very mobile, taking part in window-smashing or other acts of violence in different parts of the country, and undergoing multiple arrests and/or periods of imprisonment. This makes it hard to work out how much local support there might have been for militancy, since there were few WSPU branches in Scotland. In particular instances, NRS records indicate that local supporters paid the fines of women in prison, or housed them after release under the Cat-and-Mouse Act. This might be investigated further to attempt to establish who key local supporters were, and what kind of networks existed in Scotland. This would also shed more light on the class background of supporters. Claims have sometimes been made that militant organisations attracted more working-class supporters than the constitutionalist suffrage societies did, but evidence for this remains thin on the ground. Working-class support for women's suffrage, from the Co-operative Women's Guild and STUC, for example, was constitutionalist, although these bodies also supported the principle of the universal adult franchise, a demand that went beyond that of the majority of suffrage campaigners. However, sections of the labour movement, such as the ILP, supported the WSPU, which suggests there was some working-class support for militancy.

Edinburgh and Scottish Women Citizens Associations records

The NRS holds a substantial archive of records from Women Citizens Associations, namely the records of the Edinburgh Women Citizens Association (EWCA), and of the Scottish Council of Women Citizens Associations (SCWCA). Since the focus of my talk was women's enfranchisement, I examined these records for evidence of continued campaigning for the full franchise, which was eventually granted by the Equal Franchise Act, 1928.

The EWCA was formed in May 1918, as a result of a meeting of all the women's associations in the city, with the aim of educating women in the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. Membership of the EWCA overlapped with membership of the ENSWS. The latter, however, transformed itself into the Edinburgh Society for Equal Citizenship (ESEC) in April 1919. Both types of organisations had several branches in Scotland, and in Glasgow the WCA and SEC had formally amalgamated by 1926. WCAs were more numerous however - by 1919 fourteen towns in Scotland had formed WCAs, and by 1929 there were 19 WCAs in the Scottish Council. By contrast, in 1927 there appear to have been only four National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) branches in Scotland, although a number of WCAs were also affiliated to NUSEC.

In the case of Edinburgh it is clear that there was continuity between the ENSWS and both the ESEC and EWCA, who often worked closely together up until the early 1930s. Some of the leading members of the new organisations had also been associated with the WSPU and/or WFL.
although the majority appear to have been suffragists. To what extent there were continuities between the earlier generations of suffrage organisations and WCAs elsewhere remains a matter for further investigation. This seems likely to have been the case in the cities, but in some smaller towns WCAs may have been effectively new organisations.

From available records it is hard to work out what the relationships between organisations were, but it is clear that at a local level there was co-operation between a number of women’s organisations on issues such as child assault, and health provision for mothers and children. WCA records indicate that there was a very strong local focus, with support being given for women to be elected to local government office, and women councillors as members. Receptions with councillors, Provosts and Lady Provosts, as well as with MPs, were a regular occurrence.

The WCA records include the kind of resolutions passed at AGMs, and provide information on their activities. The range of issues taken up by WCAs was wide and they were very active in holding meetings and sending speakers to other groups. Issues taken up and activities included the following: supporting women candidates in municipal elections, and putting questions to candidates in municipal and parliamentary elections; meetings with town and parish women councillors; women police; women jurors; public health issues, including the quality of milk, and sanitation; housing; temperance; public morals; child assault; state pensions; price of gas; appointment of women to various boards; guardianship of infants; unemployment benefits for women; role of women in local government; regulation of prostitution; provision for ‘feeble-minded’ children; women magistrates/JP’s; rights of inheritance; sexual offences against young persons; maternal health and maternity provision; child adoption; equal pay and women's working conditions; cinema censorship; smoke abatement; support for the League of Nations; the position of the unmarried mother and her child; and, later, birth control. The separate Scottish legal system and legislation also necessitated a specific focus on Scots law and legislative reform.

In addition to all of these concerns the WCAs and SECs did take up the issue of the equal franchise and wrote in support of women having the vote on the same terms as men. The primary evidence we have for this, however, comes not so much from WCA records, but from correspondence sent to Sir John Gilmour, who was Secretary of State for Scotland (1924-1929), and who was a member of the Cabinet Committee on Equal Franchise. The creation of this Cabinet Committee followed on from Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin’s 1924 pledge to give men and women votes on an equal basis. Between 1926 and 1928 there were a number of letters to Gilmour supporting the equal franchise (with resolutions of in various formulations), including from NUSEC in London, ESEC, EWCA, Glasgow SEC and WCA Amalgamated, the SCWCA, and the National Council of Women (NCW). These hardly constituted a flood - but we do not know what might have been going on in terms of lobbying of local MPs, the Prime Minister, etc. We can speculate that there was more lobbying than this going on - after all the WCAs had regular contact with local MPs, but it may also have been felt that it was up to the London organisations to take a more active role.

When the equal franchise became law in 1928, in Edinburgh there was ‘A mass celebration of the enfranchisement of women in the Usher Hall, organised by over thirty women’s and young people’s societies’. Lady Frances Balfour was in the chair; Jennie Lee, introduced by Balfour as ‘one of the monstrous regiment of younger women who are coming into the vote’, expressed the gratitude of younger women to ‘the pioneers’. Lee was to go on to become Scotland’s second woman MP the following year. Elected to parliament at the age of 24 at a by-election in March 1929, Lee was still too young to vote - the Equal Franchise Act did not come into force until the General Election of May 1929.
The Cabinet Equal Franchise Committee

A revealing set of records held at the NRS relevant to the question of women's enfranchisement are the minutes and papers of the Cabinet Equal Franchise Committee of 1926-27. These 'secret' and 'confidential' papers form part of the NRS collection on account of the Scottish Secretary of State's membership of the Committee. This essentially reflected the Scottish Office's responsibility for electoral law and registration in Scotland, and the differences in qualifying conditions for the local government franchise in Scotland, which had to be considered as part of the wider electoral reform necessitated by new legislation. The Secretary of State, Sir John Gilmour, was not a vocal member of the committee, but others who were included Winston Churchill and Neville Chamberlain, resistant in various ways to the equal franchise.

As indicated above, the Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin, had pledged in 1924 that the Conservative Party would, if they won the election, convene a conference of all parties to examine equalising the franchise. Baldwin's pledge was a reaction to the Labour Party having put forward a Bill in 1924 to equalise the franchise - this was rejected on a second reading in February 1925. However, the pledge was ambiguous in that it did not specify either age or qualifications for the franchise.

In November 1926, the Cabinet set up an Equal Franchise Committee, with a remit:

'To consider the differences that exist at the present time between the Parliamentary and Local Government franchise of men and women respectively, and to make recommendations as to the way in which effect might best be given to the Government's pledge to secure "equal political rights for men and women."'

The eventual outcome was that women and men 21 and over were given the franchise on a residential basis. What the Cabinet papers reveal, however, is that other options were considered. Civil servants were asked to produce figures on the size of male and female electorates for the franchise at different ages - options considered were fixing the age for women at 25, or a compromise position of fixing at 23 for both sexes. There was also discussion of whether to continue a property qualification of some kind, or to make it a residential franchise.

Numbers were duly crunched on potential sizes of electorates, separately for England and Wales, and for Scotland - in line with the Scottish Office's responsibilities for electoral registration. This showed was that it was only on the basis of the 1918 Act that men were a majority of the electorate. If equal ages were used with a residential qualification, women formed the majority of the electorate whether the age limit was 25, 23, or 21.

One proposal, supported by Winston Churchill at a Committee meeting in February, 1927, was to give the franchise to women and men at 21 on the basis of occupation, and at 25 on a residential basis. It was objected by others that this would favour the working class, as middle and professional classes were less likely to be occupying their own homes at this age. Neville Chamberlain claimed that women supporters of the Government were hostile to the female franchise below 25. The Party Chairman Mr Davidson, at a later meeting, declared that 'The supporters of equal franchise were a very small if very vocal minority and commanded no general support.' He also believed that the equal franchise would prejudice the government in industrial areas.

These papers indicate that there was considerable resistance in the Conservative party to the equal franchise. The idea of women becoming the majority of the electorate was still a sticking point, but there was also resistance to further enfranchisement of working-class electors. Fears
about young people of both sexes were also expressed - they were thought to be easily influenced and irresponsible.

Further research possibilities

The NRS holds a range of records containing valuable material for historians researching the progress of the women's suffrage movement in Scotland. In addition to those outlined above there are also the records of the 1911 Census, object of a boycott by militants, which is currently being researched by Ruth Boreham. Some of the NRS records mentioned here have already been made good use of by historians, but they of course remain open to further scrutiny and interpretation. They can also form the basis of more extensive research drawing in other sources held elsewhere, and they provide important pointers to the scope of activities across Scotland and to the localities where women's suffrage and citizenship organisations were most active.

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