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The Times

The Times (1911) 'The Women's Suffrage Demonstration', 19 June, p. 33, The Times Digital Archive.

The Women's Suffrage Demonstration

A Five Miles Procession of 40,000 Persons

Albert Hall Meeting

The woman suffragists, Constitutional and militant, on Saturday evening made high festival in London for their cause, transfiguring the West-end – through which they marched for four or five hours – with pageantry. The women have had triumphal processions before – though not, as yet, so often as to blunt by familiarity the public sense of their beauty and uncommonness – but this was beyond them all in numbers and effect. At the gathering on the Embankment the marshalled lines, gleaming with banners, extended the entire length of the great promenade. Just as Big Ben was striking half past 5, Mrs Drummond, riding astride and dressed in a dark green habit with a broad-brimmed hat, came to the front, and the procession moved off, up the crowded Northumberland-avenue to the still more crowded Trafalgar-square.

The Pageant

At the head of the procession there were two arresting figures which embodied and gave dramatic expression, each in its different way, to the spirit of the demonstration. The first was the standard-bearer, carrying the purple, white and green colours of the Women's Social and Political Union – a slim fair girl in white, who was given this post of high distinction because she had endured weeks of forcible feeding in prison. The other was a striking personation of Joan of Arc. Next came the martyrs of the cause, nearly a thousand strong – led by their fighting leaders, Mrs Pankhurst, Mrs Pethick Lawrence, and Miss Christabel Pankhurst – the last in academic dress.

The artistic elements of the procession were many. Nothing could be better than the historical pageant illustrating the prominence and distinction of women in public life in the Middle Ages. Standing out of the throng was Abbess Hilda, founder of the Benedictine monastery of Whitby, who presided over an Ecclesiastic Synod in 664. In this contingent was also seen Queen Elizabeth, a tall, commanding figure in jewelled array. Interesting, too, was the group which immediately followed of great women of the 19th century. Here were Grace Darling, Jenny Lind, Florence Nightingale, and Charlotte Brontë – to mention just a few of a little company in poke bonnets and ringlets.

Next in point of attraction came the representatives of the Celtic fringe. Scotland led the way with a band of pipers playing "Annie Laurie" and a woman wearing tartan. The Irish section had colleens in flowing red cloaks; but Wales had the most distinctive costume, the girls with the nation's high conical hat, kerchief apron, and striped gown. The Welsh women as they marched sang their national songs and were led by a bard with a circlet of oak-leaves binding his long grey locks. In the Colonial contingent all the Dominions were to be seen, the place of honour being given to New Zealand, the first country in the British Empire to give women the vote. There was also an international contingent in which the distinctive dress of every nation in Europe was exhibited.

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Classes and Professions

Women of every class of society seemed to be united in the demonstration. Mainly, however, they were women of assured circumstances. The representatives of the wives and daughters of the working classes were comparatively few. On the other hand, many indications of wealth were to be observed, not least in the number of motor-cars and smart carriages and pairs – festooned with flags and flowers – which brought the leading personages to the Embankment and fell in at the rear of the procession. The class, however, that loomed largest was what is usually known as the lower middle. Every profession, business and calling followed by women was represented. A group of elegantly-gowned women carrying bamboo poles wreathed in carnations, roses, and smilax was composed of actresses. In contrast with them in modes was the University section – a long line of women in black gowns and caps. Politics of all shades had contingents. Even the Churches were represented by separate organisations. In the Church of England group were to be seen clergymen carrying banners. There was also a Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, and the contingent representative of the Free Churches was the largest of the three.

Constitutionalists and Militants

The surprise of the demonstration, however, was the unexpected strength of the Constitutionalists which it showed. The Women's Social and Political Union and the Women's Freedom League combined were outnumbered and overshadowed by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society, led by the president, Mrs Henry Fawcett. Every part of the kingdom was represented in this immense section. It was brilliant also, such was the lavish display of its particularly vivid colours of red, white, and green.

The procession took two and a half hours to pass a given point. But it was interrupted frequently at several crossings on the way to allow the traffic – mainly motor-cars with people in evening dress – to pass. It was half-past 8 o'clock before the last contingent turned from St. James's Street into Piccadilly – that is, three hours after the head of the procession had left the Embankment – and in Piccadilly they had covered only a third of their journey to the various places of meeting. The procession was five miles long and about 40,000 women walked in it. The march, toilsome and trying though it must have been, was well maintained in spirit as well as in stateliness, showing a wonderful capacity to endure physical strain and discomfort. As for the spectators, they were deeply interested, but not demonstrative. Perhaps the only individual in the procession who got a cheer from the disinterested onlookers was Mrs Despard as she went by bare-headed, carrying a sheaf of yellow lilies. To many people, no doubt it must have been a spectacle that troubled and provoked as well as fascinated.