

BARRETT, RACHEL (1874 - 1953), suffragette

Name: Rachel Barrett
Date of birth: 1874
Date of death: 1953
Partner: Ida Alexa Ross Wylie
Parent: Rees Barrett
Parent: Ann Barrett (née Jones)
Gender: Female
Occupation: suffragette
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Activism
Author: Mary Thorley

Rachel Barrett was born on 12 November 1874 at 23 Union Street, Carmarthen, the second child of Ann Barrett (née Jones, 1839-c.1906) and Rees Barrett (1812-1878), a road surveyor. Both her parents were Welsh-speakers. Her father died when she was four years old and the family moved to a property in Morley Street. Rachel attended Stratford Abbey School in Stroud as a boarder and, having excelled in the Oxford Local Examinations, she won a scholarship to Aberystwyth University where she was awarded a BSc in Mathematics and Science.

Rachel taught for three years at Carmarthen County School and, in 1905, became science mistress at Penarth County School. In 1906, she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and helped Adela Pankhurst with her work in Wales. Having resigned (or being sacked for her activities) from her post in Penarth, Rachel then left Wales intending to study for a DSc at the London School of Economics, but soon became a full time worker for the WSPU. As Ryland Wallace comments, '[w]omen's suffrage came to consume the existence of many women and of no Welsh woman was this more true than of Rachel Barrett, who dedicated almost a decade of her life to the cause'. Although exhausted by her work for the movement she was the 'chairman' of 'Platform 14' at a rally in Hyde Park in the summer of 1908, a role she reprised in the summer of 1910 as 'chair' of the Welsh Platform. In autumn 1909, having worked with Annie Kenney in Bristol, Rachel became one of the organisers of the Newport branch of the WSPU and embarked on an exhausting programme of public speaking and other events.

As a Welsh speaker, Rachel led a campaign in North Wales in the summer of 1910 during which she was part of a deputation which met with [Lloyd George](#) at his house in Crieth. After arguing hotly with him for two and a half hours she left 'more convinced than before of his determined opposition to the WSPU and the insincerity of his support of the suffrage.'

Shortly after this meeting, Rachel was appointed as the organiser for Wales and, as well as a substantial amount of public speaking, she also organised Mrs Pankhurst's tour of North Wales in June 1911. In the same month, she took part in the Women's Coronation Procession, dressed in Welsh costume. The Procession was, in the words of Christabel Pankhurst, intended to be 'the most imposing peaceful demonstration...and Pageant of Empire' presenting the case for votes for women in a non-violent manner.

By the final months of 1911, Rachel had become a key figure in the movement and met with Reginald McKenna, the Home Secretary, in the House of Commons. Given Rachel's growing prominence within the movement and her ability to challenge and debate, it is not surprising that after Christabel Pankhurst's escape to Paris, she was chosen by Annie Kenney to help her 'run the national WSPU campaign ... and in the autumn of 1912 ... was put in charge of the new paper *The Suffragette*', the circulation of which was over 40,000 copies per week.

There is no doubt that Rachel possessed many attributes that were invaluable to the movement: her intellectual capabilities, and her strong beliefs which placed her on the left-wing of the movement. As Rachel became established in London, she spoke alongside the Pankhursts, Annie Kenney and other leading suffragettes at venues such as The London Pavilion, Piccadilly Circus, The Steinway Hall and the Grand Theatre, Manchester. In July 1912, she shared a speaking platform with the suffragist [Alice Abadam](#), also of Carmarthen, at the Hyde Park demonstration where they were both speaking on behalf of the Cymric Suffrage Union. During the same month, Rachel and the Ranees of Sarawak, Margaret Brooke, conducted a series of open-air meetings in Hertfordshire. Although there are few reports of the content of her speeches, Rachel focused on the general issues surrounding the cause of votes for women and on the status of imprisoned suffragettes, calling for them to be treated as political prisoners. She also defended the more aggressive methods of campaigning, including the burning of buildings and the smashing of windows. In August 1912, she was part of a delegation of four women who met with Robert Borden, the Prime Minister of Canada, at the Savoy Hotel.

One aspect of Rachel Barrett's work for the movement was her photography of significant occasions. This may explain why her own appearances in photographs of meetings and other events are scarce. The most famous photograph that is attributed to her is the one taken outside the Houses of Parliament on 18 November 1910, when Prime Minister Asquith once more failed to deliver the provisions of the Conciliation Bill. As the suffragettes staged a protest outside the Palace of Westminster, over 150 were assaulted both by the police and other men present and 119 women were arrested. It remains one of the most infamous events in the history of the suffrage movement and was responsible for an escalation in the activity of militant suffragettes.

From January 1913, following Emmeline Pankhurst's exhortation that 'to be militant in some form or another, is a moral obligation' the members of the WSPU began to launch attacks on property as part of an 'eruption of a guerrilla-style militancy'. This escalation of the campaign included the destruction of pillar boxes, the breaking of windows in shops and the burning down of the refreshment rooms in Regent's Park. In April of the same year, the notorious 'Cat and Mouse Act' or The Prisoners' (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act was passed through Parliament and Mrs Pankhurst was put on trial and sentenced to three years in prison. On 30 April 1913, the police raided the WSPU office at Lincoln's Inn House and Rachel, along with five others, was arrested. In June of the same year all six were found guilty of conspiracy to 'commit damage to property and inciting others to do so'. In the months between April and June the accused were brought before magistrates several times and were described, variously, in the press as 'young hot bloods' and 'terrorists' who were part of the suffragettes' 'reign of terror'. Rachel was sentenced to nine months in prison and the judge recommended that the prisoners be kept incarcerated even if they went on hunger strike.

Rachel's trial at the Old Bailey was held during the first two weeks of June 1913 and coincided with the death of Emily Wilding Davison on 8 June, following her protest at the Derby. Davison's funeral brought the streets of London to a standstill and Rachel was one of the chief mourners, walking immediately behind the coffin in the procession. Within three days of the funeral Rachel was incarcerated, firstly in Holloway prison and then in Canterbury, where she immediately went on hunger strike. Released into a nursing home when she became 'very feeble' she was re-arrested after three weeks of recuperation. This pattern of arrest and release was repeated several times, including on one occasion in July 1913 when she was rearrested after speaking at a public meeting in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street. Rachel then went on thirst and hunger strike and was subsequently released in a very poor physical condition. At this time, she went to Edinburgh where she had an operation and remained there under treatment, until December 1913. She then returned to London and was 'smuggled into Kingsway House under the eyes of the detectives' where she lived in secret until the following May editing and publishing *The Suffragette* every week.

At the outbreak of war, the unconditional release of suffragette prisoners was announced, and Mrs Pankhurst declared a suspension of all agitation in order to support the war effort. Rachel echoed these sentiments and denounced Germany as 'the most formidable embodiment of militarism in the history of the world'. Rachel continued to address meetings during the war particularly on the subject of the employment of women and she, herself, took up a post in England as a mathematics teacher at a large county school of 250 boys between the ages of 10 and 18 years where three of the eleven staff were women.

In 1919, she undertook a road trip around America with Ida Wylie (1885-1959), the novelist, and they later lived together in California. In 1928, Rachel and Ida supported their friend, Radclyffe Hall, when Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, a story of lesbian love, became the subject of an obscenity trial and was subsequently banned. After her relationship with Wylie ended, Rachel moved to Sible Hedingham, Essex, where she became a member of the Suffragette Fellowship. She was to appear in court on two further occasions, once for a motoring offence and once for showing a light during the blackout in World War II. Rachel Barrett died in a Sussex nursing home, at the age of seventy-nine, on 26 August 1953.

Author

Mary Thorley

Sources

Rachel Barrett, 'Autobiography', in Jane Aaron and Ursula Masson (eds), *The very salt of life: Welsh women's political writings from Chartism to suffrage* (Dinas Powys 2007)

D. Atkinson, *Rise Up Women!: The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (London 2018), p. 255

Ryland Wallace, *The women's suffrage movement in Wales, 1866-1928* (Cardiff 2009)

[British Newspaper Archive](#)

LSE, Women's Library, Suffrage Collection

National Library of Wales [Welsh Newspapers Online](#)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Rachel Barrett](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [E. T. John Papers: Rachel Barrett, Pontypool, to E. T. John, 1911, Nov. 13](#)

Wikidata: [Q18674355](#)

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