

# From Imprisonment to Patrol

## The Role of Some Suffragettes in the Development of Women Policing

By DR CLIFFORD WILLIAMS

**The early history of policewomen in England is complex, with many different approaches by women involved, and views expressed by the authorities. This is partly a reflection of the involvement, or otherwise, of suffragettes and suffragists in the formation of women's preventative patrols and the Women Police Service. Some of these women had been imprisoned before the First World War but became key figures in the development of police women. At the end of the First World War their suffragette activities still cast a shadow on whether they were accepted by the police establishment.**

Mary Sophia Allen (1878-1964) became a suffragette after being inspired by a speech by Miss Annie Kenney. We do not know the exact date but it is believed to have been 1907.<sup>1</sup> By 1909 Mary was fully involved in the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union). The WSPU was the more militant suffragette organisation, and had broken away from the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1903. Generally the suffragettes refer to those who took action like members of the WSPU, and suffragists were supporters of reform but not supporters of criminal

activities (e.g. the NUWSS).

In 1909 Mary Allen was an active militant and she was imprisoned three times that year.<sup>2</sup> Following her release after being on hunger strike in July 1909 she was presented with the WSPU hunger strike medal. Her third and final arrest, in November 1909, followed an incident where she broke a window at the Inland Revenue Offices in Bristol.<sup>3</sup>

Between the second and third terms of imprisonment she represented the WSPU on an inspection of Holloway Prison led by the Labour M.P. Keir Hardie in August 1909.<sup>4</sup> Mary went on to be a leading proponent of women police.

The outbreak of war led the suffragist and suffragette movement to suspend activities and support the war effort. Some helped to establish the first women police organisations! This unusual step was seen as an appropriate move based upon experience of being handled (literally) by the male police. Many of these women felt that women dealt with by the police should be handled by women. They also felt strong and tough enough to do what many perceived as only work fit for men.

It would be wrong to suggest that the relationship between the

suffragettes and the police was always one of conflict. The militant and criminal activity of many did naturally bring women before the courts, but peaceful suffrage activity was often 'policed' by the police in a way that enabled the women's safety. In Portsmouth, for example, in 1914 the suffragette Nina Boyle and supporters who had come under attack from a mob were saved by the Portsmouth police and taken to safety in the police station.<sup>5</sup> In a march to London by non-militants in 1913, Harriet Blessley wrote in her diary;

*'Police very friendly and prove easy converts. They have us for a day out, push our bicycles and assist with banners.'*<sup>6</sup>

1. Nina Boyd (2013) *From Suffragette to Fascist; The many lives of Mary Sophia Allen* (The History Press, Stroud). Page 23.
2. Boyd (2013) *op cit* Chapter 3 'Suffering in the cause of womankind'.
3. Boyd (2013) p 36.
4. Boyd (2013) p 41.
5. *Portsmouth Evening News* 13 June 1914: 'Police shelter suffragettes from angry mob'. Further reported in memoirs of Nina Boyle (*Portsmouth Evening News*, 30 November 1932).
6. Harriet Blessley Diary 13.7-27.7.1913 (Portsmouth History Centre 1155A) The entry refers to 17 Jul 1913 and the police are Hampshire Constabulary.

At the start of the Great War, Nina Boyle of the Women's Freedom League (a breakaway from the WSPU) offered to recruit women as special constables. She was concerned that the Contagious Diseases Act (which forced women to be inspected and treated for venereal disease) would be reintroduced as a wartime measure, and she wanted to ensure women had some influence on how and if it was used. Her offer of recruiting women specials was turned down by the Metropolitan Commissioner of Special Constabulary, Sir Edward Ward. Boyle heard about Margaret Damer Dawson and her progress in establishing the Women Police Volunteers (WPV) and decided to join forces with her.<sup>7</sup>

While Damer Dawson did persuade the government to use her women police for roles at munitions factories, the government and some police forces, including the Metropolitan Police Force, looked more favourably on the voluntary patrols of the National Union Of Women Workers (NUWW). The NUWW Women's Volunteer Patrols (WVP) even received a subsidy in 1917 from the Met Police and their supervisor, Mrs Sofia Stanley, later became the leader of the Met Police Women's Department set up after World War One.

The WPV set up by Dawson included a number of former suffragettes; Olive Watson, Dora Meeson Coates and Isobel Goldingham amongst them, as well as Mary Allen.

Nina Boyle's WFL also included Edith Watson. In 1913 both had been part of a riverside demonstration outside Parliament, where from a pleasure barge Nina addressed members of Parliament taking tea on the terrace. A police launch was summonsed but was too late to catch the suffragettes.<sup>8</sup> In 1914 Boyle and Watson adopted the names Ann

Smith and Edyth Smythe (or Edith Smith depending on which account you read), and together with three other women (all Smyth!) chained themselves together in Marlborough Street Police Court. This followed a magistrate, Frederick Mead, refusing to allow women sit in 'his' court as spectators. Boyle and Watson had been concerned about the treatment in court of women and children witnesses and victims. The five chained together were all arrested.<sup>9</sup>

Edith Watson donned the WPV uniform in September 1914 and strolled outside the Old Bailey in full uniform.<sup>10</sup>

Nina Boyle and Damer Dawson soon had different views on how the women should be deployed; Boyle was very much opposed to the strict moral enforcement role with which the Contagious Diseases Act was concerned. She also did not want the women to work under the direction of male police. When put to a vote of the WPV corps, Dawson received the vast majority of those attending. Only three voted for Boyle.<sup>11</sup>

The first actual employment of women in uniform 'on actual police duty' was in November 1914, in Grantham.<sup>12</sup> Here, Mary Allen and Ellen Harburn patrolled in darkness and along muddy streets and lanes. General Hammersley wrote in January 1915 that

*'The services of the two ladies... have proved of great value. They have removed sources of trouble to the troops in a manner that the military police would not attempt. Moreover, I have no doubt whatever the work of these ladies, in an official capacity, is a great safeguard to the moral welfare of young girls in the town.'*<sup>13</sup>

Harburn and Allan were succeeded by Miss Teed and Mrs Smith. In November 1915, Mrs Edith Smith was sworn in and became the first such

appointed police woman in Britain.

Ellen Harburn, a suffragette, had been born Ellen Frances Haarblicher in 1864 in Chorlton, Lancashire. In 1901 she was living with her 60-year-old widowed mother in Fulham. There are a number of references to her in *The Suffragette*.<sup>14</sup> She changed her surname at the beginning of the war as anti-German feelings were strong. Harburn was later awarded the MBE for her police work in the war.

Isobel Frances Goldingham was a former WSPU hunger striker. She had been born in India in 1874 to an army family.<sup>15</sup> She was known as Toto to her close friends. She also was awarded the MBE for her work during the war.

Dora Meeson Coates had been in the Artists' Suffrage League (ASL), formed in January 1907. She was an Australian designer of stained glass. The ASL created propaganda materials.<sup>16</sup>

Olive Walton had been imprisoned for window-breaking. In 1914 she was photographed when arrested in Dundee, after she tried to throw a petition into the King's carriage during a Royal visit to the city.<sup>17</sup>

None of these former suffragettes were welcomed at the end of the war when some police forces, including the Metropolitan Police, established their first full-time women police sections.

Less militant suffragists of the former NUWSS may well have joined the women police patrols or even the WPS, and because they did not have criminal records and association with the law-breaking activities of the WSPU, they may have gone on to become police women. Papers relating to voluntary patrols by the NUWW (which later was called The National Council of Women (NCW)) are held by the Metropolitan Police Heritage Centre.<sup>18</sup>

Examination of correspondence



WW1 postcard *The Converted Suffragette*

between the national office and various county groups has been examined by the author. Rarely are the words 'suffrage', 'suffragette' or 'suffragist' mentioned. In one report provided by Edith C Morgan from Winchester, Hampshire to Head Office on 8 November 1914, she mentions that 'the patrol movement is not a suffragist one.'<sup>19</sup> This emphasis suggests a desire to disassociate from any connection to suffrage movements.

It was the connection of some police women to suffrage, and in particular suffragette activity, that caused many Chief Constables to shun women police. When the Metropolitan Police started recruiting

for their own Women Police in 1918, it is probable that they vetted candidates against lists like HO 45/24665.

Neville Macready, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police 1918-20, was not going to allow any suffragettes into the new MP Women Police. He preferred to recruit women who had been part of the voluntary patrols of the National Council of Women (NUWW). The WPS was snubbed. In 1924 he told the Bridgeman Committee 'The main point was to eliminate any women of extreme views - the vinegary spinster or blighted middle-aged fanatic.'<sup>20</sup> Macready was also disgusted by homosexuals and women who dressed

7. Boyd (2013) p 49

8. Sophie Jackson (2014) *Women On Duty; A History of The First Female Police Force* (Fonthill Media Ld, U.K.). pp 28-9.

9. Jackson (2014) *op cit* p 30. Jackson states they used the name 'Smith' but in the Home Office archives they are listed as Smyth as well as Smith. HO 45/24665 is an index of suffragettes arrested 1906-1914. The names given under Smith and Smyth include Edith Smith, Lilian Smyth, Louisa Smyth and Enuncita Smyth. All arrested 15 or 16 July 1914. The entry for Ann Smith states 'see Nina Boyle'. The entry for Lilian Smyth states see 'Lilian Ball'. See also *The Globe* 16 July 1914 report of proceedings headed 'The Jolly "Smiths"'.  
10. Jackson (2014) p 45.

11. Joan Lock (2014) *The British Policewomen* (Robert Hale. London) p 29. The name of the WPV was then changed to the Women Police Service, but Boyle continued with a small WPV, mainly in London and Brighton. This eventually fizzled out about 1916. See Derek Oakensen's excellent article (2015) 'Antipathy to ambivalence; Politics and women police in Sussex, 1915-45' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 153 (2015) 171-89. Also Jackson (2014) pp 143-4.

12. Commandant Mary S Allen (1925) *The Pioneer Policewoman* (Chatto and Windus, London) p 27.  
13. Allan (1925) *op cit* p 37.

14. *The Suffragette*, 5 December 1913 Miss Haarbleicher was thanked for an interesting address to a women's meeting. Harburn died in 1963 aged 99.

15. Boyd (2013) p 53. Goldingham was awarded the MBE. She died in 1957.

16. Boyd (2013) p 52.

17. Boyd (2013) p 52. *The Dundee Courier* (11 July 1914) reported with the headline 'Suffragette makes attempt to throw literature into Royal Carriage' and states that the missile struck the coach and rolled away. The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (13 July 1914) reported that the rubber ball (containing a message) landed in the carriage on the Queen's lap! Walton is listed in the Home Office Index of arrested suffragettes (HO 45/24665). She was arrested in 1911 and 1912.

18. Metropolitan Police Heritage Centre located in 2018 at Empress Approach, Lille Road, London SW6 1TR, but due to move soon to as yet unidentified premises. It is believed that these papers were originally held by the Police Federation at their offices in Surbiton (before they moved to Leatherhead).

19. Report Woman Patrol Committee Winchester Branch November 8 1914. From organiser Mrs E C Morgan (text reproduced by permission of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime Heritage Centre)).  
20. Jackson (2014) p 167.

20. Jackson (2014) p 167.





### The Pioneers, 1914.

FRONT ROW: Left to right  
 D. MEESON COATES (Chief Inspector) M. S. ALLEN (Chief Superintendent) MISS C. V. HALL (Hon. Treasurer) M. DAMER DAWSON (Chief Officer) B. GOLDINGHAM (Principal of Clerical Staff)  
 SECOND ROW: A. ST. JOHN PARTRIDGE (Staff Officer) J. M. CAMPBELL K. CANTER E. L. DAWSON F. GRAHAM  
 THIRD ROW: L. SIMPSON D. PETHICK O. WALTON (Sergeant) A. GARDINER

like men. This applied to Mary Allen, and her role as a militant suffragette was not forgotten.

Not much was going right for the WPS in 1920. Their founder Damer Dawson died from heart disease, and the chances of former WPS police finding work in London was low. The only ray of light was when the Metropolitan Police turned down a request from the British Army to send some women police to help in Ireland. The WPS took up the challenge. Their work in Ireland opened up opportunities in the Rhine Provinces. Mary Allen paid a visit to Cologne herself in 1923. She increasingly ventured abroad and liked to appear in full uniform and give the impression of representing the British policewomen. Later her associations with the Nazi movement led her to be *persona non grata*.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

A small handful of militant

suffragettes were important pioneers of women police. I have identified less than six who were imprisoned for their suffragette activities. During World War One, Mary Allen and Isobel Goldingham were two of those who had been imprisoned who earned respect and praise for their war work in developing the police. Allen was awarded the OBE. Nina Boyle came up against a lot more resistance, mainly because she would not compromise on her view on women's equality and would not help the male authorities impose what she saw as draconian restrictions on women. In 1916 she changed her war work to helping sick and wounded soldiers in Serbia.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the war, the police forces who continued to employ police women chose to recruit women mainly from the voluntary patrols of the NCW (NUWW) and avoided using those with suffragette or suffragist connections.

However, more work is needed

to see if some of those recruited had been involved in the suffrage movement. Involvement in the WPS did not mean the woman had been a suffragist, and involvement in the NCW (NUWW) did not mean the woman had not been a suffragist.

21. Jackson (2014) p 168 and Boyd (2013).

22. Jackson (2014) p 143.



CLIFFORD WILLIAMS is a historian and retired police officer. He has published books and articles on history and criminology. After studying at the Universities of London (SOAS), Cambridge and Bradford (where he did his Ph D), he joined the police service. His recent books are *111 Years Policing Winchester: A History of the Winchester City Force 1832-1943* (Winchester: Hampshire Constabulary History Society, 2012) and *Women Policing Hampshire and the Isle of Wight 1915-2016* (Netley: Hampshire Constabulary History Society, 2016). His current research includes policing gay and bisexual men 1950-2010, as well as continuing research on early policewomen.