EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Complutense Journal of English Studies
ISSN-e: 2386-3935

ESTUDIOS

Un/Learning the Suffragette in Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* and Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage*[1]

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https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.97677 Recibido, 29/8/2024 • Aceptado, 4/11/2025

Abstract: This article focuses on the instructive protagonists of Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* (1999) and Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage* (2018) in what regards their revisionist didacticism of the British suffragette movement. The narrative devices deployed by Muir and Evans will be analysed as revealing the novels' double didactic value as pedagogic tools for characters and readers. I argue that Muir and Evans do not seek to gain supporters for a cause already accomplished, but to fill in existent gaps in the historical record about such a crucial part of feminist history. The use of different narrative elements – epistolary fragments in *Suffrage City* and lectures and speeches in *Old Baggage* – confer these novels with an educational tone helping readers un/learn certain aspects of the women's campaign for the vote. Ultimately, I seek to prove that the authors offer an insight of the suffrage movement that stems from the revision and disclaim of wrong assumptions and ideas about the Cause. In this respect, I argue that the novels urge readers to learn about the women's movement and challenge preconceived notions about this historical period achieving this double purpose by emphasising the role of the suffragette as educator and mentor.
Keywords: British suffragette movement; revisionist didacticism; *Old Baggage*; *Suffragette City*

ES Des/Aprendiendo la Suffragette en *Suffragette City* de Kate Muir y *Old Baggage* de Lissa Evans

Resumen: Este artículo se centra en las instructivas protagonistas de Suffragette City (1999) de Kate Muir y de Old Baggage (2018) de Lissa Evans en lo que respecta a su didactismo revisionista del movimiento sufragista británico. Se analizarán los recursos utilizados por Muir y Evans para revelar el doble valor didáctico de las novelas como herramientas pedagógicas para los/las personajes y los/las lectores/as. Sostengo que Muir y Evans no buscan ganar partidarios para una causa ya lograda, sino llenar los vacíos existentes en el registro histórico sobre una parte tan crucial de la historia feminista. El uso de diferentes elementos narrativos –fragmentos epistolares en Suffragette City y conferencias y discursos en Old Baggage– confieren a estas novelas un tono educativo ayudando a los/las lectores/as a aprender o desaprender ciertos aspectos de la campaña de las mujeres por el voto. En última instancia, busco demostrar que las autoras ofrecen una visión del movimiento por el sufragio que surge de la revisión de y renuncia a suposiciones e ideas erróneas sobre la Causa. En este sentido, sostengo que las novelas instan a los/las lectores/as a aprender sobre el movimiento sufragista y desafiar las nociones preconcebidas sobre este período histórico logrando este doble propósito al enfatizar el papel de la sufragista como educadora y mentora.
Palabras clave: movimiento sufragista británico; didactismo revisionista; Old Baggage; Suffragette City

How to cite: Ripoll Fonollar, M. (2025). Un/Learning the Suffragette in Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* and Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage*, en *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 33, e97677. https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.97677

[1] This article is part of the research project PID2021-122249NB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF/EU.

1. Introduction

Contemporary authors have found their own strategies to revisit, pay tribute to, and educate readers on the herstory of women's enfranchisement, much as suffragists and suffragettes once used meetings and speeches to disseminate their ideology and instruct their audiences (Billington 1982, 669). The film *Suffragette* (2015), for instance, was produced with the pedagogical purpose of compensating the existent absence of suffragette stories in the cinema (Gavron 2015, 986)[2]. When the movie was tested, its director, Sarah Gavron, realised that her aim had been accomplished because young audiences "were keenly interested, surprised to learn of the actions of these women, and realised how much we now benefit in our more egalitarian society" (993-994). Coinciding with the film's premiere, in fact, *The Guardian* published a list of YA titles for readers eager to learn about "the bravery, camaraderie and spirit of the Suffragettes" (Sandlin 2015), which included classic works, such as Geraldine Symons's *Miss Rivers and Miss Bridges* (1975), and more recent ones, such as Carol Drinkwater's *Suffragette: The Diary of Dollie Baxter* (2003), Sarah Grazebrook's *Crooked Pieces* (2007), Julie Hearn's *Hazel* (2007), Karen Schwabach's *The Hope Chest* (2008), Jacqueline Wilson's *Opal Plumstead* (2014), and Cat Winters's *The Cure for Dreaming* (2014). Indeed, the 2010s not only saw an increasing interest in existent literary material about the suffrage movement, but also a veritable explosion of children and YA books devoted to the topic, which proliferated in 2018, around the 100th anniversary of partial voting rights for women. Examples of these texts include children stories and YA titles such as Linda Newbery's *Polly's March* (2011), Sally Nicholls' *Things a Bright Girl Can Do* (2017), Anna Carey's *Mollie on the March* (2018), and the collection of short stories *Make More Noise* (2018), edited by Emma Carroll. More recent publications include Barbara Mitchelhill's *Secret Suffragette* (2019) and Iszi Lawrence's *The Unstoppable Letty Pegg* (2020), and it seems likely that the trend will not stop here.

However, children and young readers have not been the only target of these new fictional works about suffrage. The years surrounding the centenary also witnessed the publication of historical novels for adults which also embark on the project of revisiting and teaching women's suffrage. These titles include Ajay Close's *A Petrol Scented Spring* (2015), Lucy Ribchester's *The Hourglass Factory* (2015), and Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage* (2018). The pedagogic dimension of women's writing was already intrinsic to the suffrage movement, which also relied on the didactic power of writing as an effective method to gain supporters for the Cause. Besides newspapers and autobiographies, many campaigners produced novels or plays because, as Katherine Cockin emphasises, they offered the possibility of simultaneously educating and entertaining audiences (1998, 135). The creation of the Artists' Suffrage League (ASL), the Women Writers Suffrage League (WWSL), and the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) illustrates the didactic relevance, effectiveness, and appeal of these creative forms. Teachers also played a significant role in the fight for the vote and founded their own association in 1912, the Women Teachers' Franchise Union (Oram 2000, 210). The symbol of the woman instructor, highly educated and yet unfranchised, worked as a valuable contrast to the criminal, lunatic, yet enfranchised man (211). Both suffragists and suffragettes utilised the image of the educator and her rhetoric and oratorical skills to instruct their audiences, since many teachers participated in public performances and gave speeches to favour the Cause (208). Whenever they referred to their job, they presented it not as "womanly work with children, but as professional work of national importance" (204).

The didactic character of the movement and suffragettes' pedagogical task is not far from the task carried out by contemporary authors writing fiction about the Cause. Thus, this article understands contemporary women writers as responsible for producing, going back to Alison Oram's words, "professional work of national importance", and delves into the didactic potential of Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* (1999) and Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage* (2018). Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* focuses on Albertine, a performance feminist artist in her thirties, living in 1990s New York and haunted by the spirit of her great-great-grandmother, the Scottish suffragette Agnes McPhail. Albertine's conversations with Agnes' ghost occur at the dawn of the twenty-first century and coexist with her reading of Agnes' correspondence to her sister from 1899 to 1912 through which Albertine, and by extension, readers, learn about Agnes' conversion to the Cause and the key aspects of the suffragette campaign in Scotland. Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage* tells the story of Mattie Simpkin, a middle-aged Londoner involved in the suffragette movement. With universal suffrage about to be approved, Mattie feels there is still work to do to achieve parity and gives lectures about the women's campaign for the vote. Inspired by suffragettes' practices and principles, she creates the Hampstead Heath Girls' Club and bases her pedagogy on the martial art of jujitsu, targeting the young women who are uncertain and ignorant about what voting entails, and training them in the necessary fighting and ideological skills for their new lives as enfranchised subjects.

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[2] Although filmic representations about the women's suffrage movement were scarce at the time, suffragists and suffragettes appeared in both fiction and documentary British movies. Some examples are the newsreels, documentaries, and comedies produced between 1899-1917 and included in *Make More Noise! Suffragettes in Silent Film*, a British Film Institute's compilation that came out in 2015 complementing the release of *Suffragette* (Bradshaw 2015). Prior to well-known twenty-first century productions, such as Gavron's film, the only filmic reference that people had of a suffragette was that of Winifred Banks, the mother figure in *Mary Poppins* (1964). Directed by Robert Stevenson, this American musical film illustrates Walt Disney's mobilisation of the suffragette, the quintessential British feminist icon of the 1910-1920s, to promote patriarchal and traditional family values in 1960s North America. *Mary Poppins* depicts women's suffrage as a pastime and comically represents Mrs. Banks giving support to Emmeline Pankhurst, participating in suffragette marches, and neglecting her duties as a mother. Ms. Poppins, the nanny, is presented as the one in charge of restoring the family order and fulfilling the tasks that Mrs. Banks disregards. The messages implied in this Disney production is, therefore, similar to those conveyed by anti-suffrage posters that presented suffragists and suffragettes negatively to emphasise women's role as "the angel of the house".

I contend that these two novels offer an insight into women's militant fight for enfranchisement which arguably has a double potential: to enrich readers' knowledge on the period and to challenge pre-established conceptions of the suffragette, as they encourage audiences to un/learn the *herstory* of the women's suffrage movement, often under- or misrepresented in history books. Thus, I categorise both texts into the subgenre of neo-historical fiction for their "active interrogation of the past" (Rousselot 2014, 2), and argue that their dual teaching is performed by the figure of the suffragette, who adopts a pedagogical role not only within the narrative, where she instructs other characters, but also beyond, because her teachings transcend the text and speak to its contemporary readers.

The first section serves as an introduction to briefly explore Muir's *Suffragette City* and Evans' *Old Baggage* inherent didactic character based on the context in which the novels are set, their choice of protagonists, and the narrative devices deployed in both texts. The second section provides a detailed analysis of the texts to examine how and why they revisit certain aspects of the suffragette campaign. Such a comprehensive study of the novels will allow me to trace the similarities between both novels and gather the information into four different main topics to ultimately argue that Muir and Evans create a series of feminist lessons that have a double potential: to teach the characters of their stories and to enlighten their readership.

2. Revisionist Didacticism: Setting, Characterisation and Narrative Devices

Suffragette City and *Old Baggage* teach their readers about the women's suffrage movement while correcting some of the facts that have at times been silenced or misconceived in traditional accounts of this period—such as the portrayal of suffragettes as extremists or the idea that women won the vote solely through their war work. The potential of the novels to mobilise this historical material and serve as un/learning tools reveals the appropriateness of neo-historical fiction to "[look] back to expose the crimes of the past, to engage in revisionist storytelling, or to bring up-to-date historical insights to readers" (Keen 2006, 179). The authors draw on this subgenre of historical fiction and engage in a process of revisionist didacticism as they encourage readers to learn about the suffrage movement by questioning and reworking mainstream and preconceived narratives about the topic. In turn, these novels share historical fiction's pedagogical purpose whereby they "contribute to the historical imaginary [while] allowing a culture to 'understand' past moments" (De Groot 2016, 14). Before analysing the specific lessons taught in the novels, this section considers the relevance of their historical setting, the characterisation of their protagonists, and the narrative devices deployed by Muir and Evans to accomplish their didactic agenda.

The revisionist didacticism of the novels derives primarily from their historical and geographical settings. *Suffragette City* is partly set in Scotland and, thus, offers an alternative version of the campaign for women's enfranchisement by filling in the existing gaps in the historical and literary record. It, therefore, departs from the English context that prevails in fictional works written by suffragettes (Elliot 2018, 324) and most contemporary works about the movement.[3] For its part, *Old Baggage*'s distinctive character derives from the timespan it covers. The action begins in 1928, the year of the death of the charismatic Emmeline Pankhurst and of the subsequent achievement of universal franchise, on the eve of the 1929 general election, the first for many women. Against this background, *Old Baggage* invites readers to reflect on the uncertainty of a period in which many women had already been granted this right but remained unfamiliar with or uninterested in performing their new citizen roles (Evans 2018b). Ironically, many contemporary narratives about the suffragette movement scarcely mention or omit altogether, the 1918 and 1928 milestones for women's enfranchisement because they focus on the previous struggle leading up to these achievements. The significance of these dates is crucial in Evans' novel, which commemorates the actual accomplishment of the vote while compensating for the lack of narratives addressing it.

The didactic revisionism of both novels is also evident in the characterisation of their protagonists, Agnes and Mattie, who are modelled on historical figures. *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* put a real suffragette at the centre of the narrative, creating biographical fiction in which readers simultaneously learn about the historical period, the lives of actual suffragettes, and the lessons they teach their pupils. Indeed, Muir and Evans show their commitment to retelling untold herstories by focusing respectively on Helen Crawfurd—one of Scotland's most influential suffrage orators—and Edith Garrud, a jujitsu instructor who trained the Amazons, a group of thirty women who protected the leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) (Roberts 2018, 39). Despite their significant contributions to the Cause, both women remain unknown or forgotten in most historical records.[4] Muir's novel makes the life of the Scottish suffragette accessible in a format which is more approachable and digestible than the few and very specialised academic documents that provide information about her life. Agnes McPhail, the protagonist of *Suffragette City*, is partly based on Helen

[3] Another example of a Scotland-based novel is Ajay Close's *A Petrol Scented Spring* (2015), which tells the story of the Scottish suffragette Arabella Scott, and the doctor in charge of forced-feeding her in Perth Prison, Dr. Huge Fergusson Watson.

[4] This is evident in the scarcity of sources about their lives. Information on Crawfurd is limited to an entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and to a 2019 PhD thesis on her life as a suffragette and a communist by Kiera Wilkins, both of which draw most of the material from Crawfurd's unpublished memoirs stored in London's Marx Memorial Library. Similarly, information on Garrud is reduced to a few newspaper articles, satirical drawings, and magazine reports (Kelly 2019, 19-20). Yet her story is slightly better known than Crawfurd's, as attested by the inclusion of Garrud in Wolf and Joao Vieira's graphic novel *Suffrajitsu: Mrs. Pankhurst's Amazons* (2015), which narrates the lives of women martial artists circulating in the news and social media to mark the 1918 centenary (Kelly 2019, 20), and the People's Plaque unveiled in 2012 to pay tribute to "this little-known suffragette" (Williams 2012).

Crawfurd.[5] Albertine learns about her great-great-grandmother, Agnes, through her grandmother, Rose, who gives Albertine a baggage trolley with some of Agnes' belongings, among them the letters she exchanged with her sister. Like Crawfurd, Agnes is renowned for her eloquence; she explains that she joined the Clarion Scouts, a speech-making class, "to learn to be a proper speaker" (*SC* 132).[6] The novel also shows Agnes explaining that in prison "I wrote my autobiography in my head, as though I were some politician or great man or woman" (*SC* 291), alluding to Crawfurd's own unpublished autobiography, although there is no evidence that it was written while in prison.

For its part, Evans' *Old Baggage* commemorates the life and achievements of Edith Garrud, a figure less celebrated than other iconic suffragettes, but who has lately gained popularity thanks to her recovery and incorporation in some recent productions.[7] Even though Evans does not directly refer to this historical figure, there is evidence that proves that Garrud inspired Mattie, the protagonist. The very first line of the novel refers to the club that Mattie usually carries in her bag, evoking Garrud's insistence that jujitsu be taught to women so they could protect themselves. The club is also mentioned when Mattie is depicted practising jujitsu: "She windmilled through another exercise, then tucked the rolling pin under one arm and lunged with the club towards an imaginary policeman, feinting and thrusting" (*OB* 57). This description is reminiscent of Garrud's jujitsu lessons, which "sought to dispel any ideas about woman's frailty, and to empower women to impart justice on the ruffian, drunken husband or even the policeman" (Callan et al. 2019, 12). Mattie seeks to instil this same philosophy in her pupils, the Amazons, named after the women who were trained to act as Pankhurst's protective escort.

Garrud's ideology is also recovered in order to shape the protagonist. After a girl questions women's strength, Mattie argues that "a woman who can unerringly thread a needle can accurately throw a stone" (*OB* 66). Similarly, when another Amazon wonders why they would want to resort to stone-throwing, Mattie replies that "as a protest; as a means of defence: as an exercise in coordination. Weapons are not only for those who begin disputes, they are for those who wish to end them" (*OB* 67). Garrud's premise was to use self-defence methods only when facing aggression (Callan et al. 2019, 11), a belief voiced by Mattie when she explains to her pupils that "violence should always be a last resort and have a purpose" (*OB* 69). Besides recalling Pankhurst's premise of not hurting anyone in the name of the Cause, Mattie shares Garrud's purpose of "introduce[ing] women to new ideas about the possibilities for their gender and undermine assumed notions of their vulnerability" (Callan et al. 2019, 12). In addition to learning self-defence, in the club, the girls can also entertain themselves:

> I am not teaching these skills with violence in mind – they are exciting activities, which the girls relish, and which nicely balance the brain work which is also part of the club regime [...]. I also make certain there is no one at all in the next-door gardens during our practice sessions. (*OB* 78)

There are further connections between Mattie and Garrud apart from their actual training. Like Garrud, who wrote articles on women's self-defence (Callan et al. 2019, 7-8), Mattie also writes about the importance of not losing the "habit of vigilance" (*OB* 4). Between 1911 and 1913, Garrud offered her dojo to protect and hide suffragettes who had participated in militant acts such as arson and were prosecuted by the police (Callan et al. 2019, 10). Similarly, Mattie's house, "the Mousehold", serves as a refuge for Pankhurst's followers, "a convalescent home for suffragette mice [when] they'd been released from prison under the Cat and Mouse Act" (*OB* 54). Mattie's links with Garrud can also be inferred from the title of the novel. One of the characters describes Mattie as "the old baggage", adding that "if she storms the barricades, they'll certainly stay stormed. She's a once-woman battalion" (*OB* 149). Besides referring to her age, the expression "old baggage" may allude to the equipment carried by an army. Mattie's baggage, then, refers to her own methods and tools of defence as a WSPU member. The novel's title, therefore, alludes to Mattie's past as a suffragette and, in particular, to her involvement in training and self-defence practices aimed at resisting male violence against women.

The narrative devices deployed in the novels provide further evidence of their revisionist didacticism. Muir and Evans combine their characters' oratory with the didactic potential of the textual forms they recreate. In *Suffragette City* Albertine and the readers simultaneously learn about women's suffrage in Scotland thanks to the thirteen letters that Agnes once exchanged with her sister Ishbel, living in India, between 1899 and 1912. The novel also includes a letter sent from Holloway to her suffragette comrade Kirsty. In her correspondence, interspersed throughout the novel, Agnes explains her conversion and subsequent devotion to the Cause, turning both Albertine and contemporary readers into her addressees. In *Old Baggage*, readers unlearn key

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5 Although in the Author's Note Muir states that the character of Agnes is partially modelled after Helen Crawfurd, Crawfurd's actual name appears in two of Agnes' letters. In one of them, there is a direct reference to Crawfurd being among the Scottish suffragettes arrested for participating in a stone-throwing event. One of Crawfurd's speeches is also alluded to in the novel.

6 From now on, *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* will be respectively referenced as *SC* and *OB*.

7 Netflix's *Enola Holmes* films about Sherlock Holme's little sister, released in 2020 (part 1) and 2022 (part 2) and directed by Harry Bradbeer, present Enola's mother Eudoria Holmes, played by Helena Bonham Carter, as a suffragette trained in jujitsu who teaches her daughter this martial art. The movies also include references to Garrud herself since the figure of Edith Grayston clearly alludes to and is modelled after suffragettes' jujitsu trainer, given that Grayston is presented as a self-defence instructor and her dojo frequently features in different scenes in which a group of women is represented practicing the sport. Different from previous depictions of this suffragette symbol, Garrud is here represented by the black actress Susan Wokoma. The musical *Sylvia* also devotes a scene to the Amazons and Garrud, whose role is also played by a black woman, Jade Hackett. The graphic novel "Jiujitsufragistas: Las Amazonas de Londres" (Xavier et al 2023) that has just been published in Spanish attests to the popularisation of Garrud's life and the growing interest to remember and commemorate this icon in other contexts and languages.

facts of the suffrage movement through a different narrative device: Mattie's lectures, delivered at the beginning and at the end of the novel, and addressed to a general audience of her age. In the first lecture, Mattie offers an overview of the women's campaign from its origins until the formation and height of the suffragette movement, providing readers with the right context to then plunge into the action. Although readers also gain knowledge about the Cause through Mattie's conversations with her suffragette comrades and her lessons to the Amazons, the lectures have a more effective impact on the reader because of their straightforward pedagogical effect.

Evans deploys various formal tactics to make readers feel part of the audience of Mattie's lectures and, thus, ensure the novel's revisionist didacticism. Mattie's first-person explanations become a strategy to address readers and encourage them to unlearn unknown or misconceived aspects of the suffragette movement. The novel's omniscient narration offers the rest of the information readers require to understand Mattie's lectures. Mattie illustrates her lectures with images, describing them in detail to reinforce her message and provide readers with a clear mental picture of the scenes. For instance, Mattie contrasts images of a First and a Second Division prison cell to hint at the mistreatment of suffragettes in jail. When a picture of the 1908 Hyde Park's march and another of the Coronation Procession are displayed, Mattie also goes over the details of these events, emphasising the performative and spectacular dimensions of the suffrage campaign, while insisting on its peaceful nature.

Mattie's lectures and Agnes' letters, addressed to other female characters, serve a metonymic function in the narrative. They exemplify Muir and Evans' broader didactic approach, offering readers a faithful overview of the key aspects of the suffragette movement. Through the interaction of historical setting, characterisation, and narrative form, both *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* engage in a process of revisionist didacticism that reclaims forgotten figures and challenges oversimplified depictions of the campaign for women's enfranchisement. This combination of fictional reproduction and pedagogical intent turns their narratives into both acts of remembrance and instruction, anticipating the specific feminist lessons discussed in the next section.

3. Lessons on Women's Suffrage: Vindicating, Questioning and De-Romanticising

The authors carry out their revisionist agendas through a historical recreation of the period with the shared aim of educating their readers. The novels arguably teach four main lessons on women's suffrage: they recall suffragettes' role as first feminists and counteract their image as terrorists; they question the claim that women obtained the franchise thanks to their contribution to the war; they make visible the abuses and violence that these women experienced at the hands of the police and other institutions; and they de-romanticise the movement and shed light on its internal conflicts and tensions.

The first lesson present in the novels derives from their shared aim to revisit the suffragettes as Britain's first feminists, counteracting popular visions of their role as violent terrorists. This idea can be found at the very beginning of Mattie's first lecture:

> I hope over the next hour and a half, to convey something of the history and methods of the militant suffragette movement, to slice through the integument of myth and slander that has so often overlaid the truth of its beliefs and actions, and to expose to clear view those of its aims that have yet to be achieved. For until women are represented as well as taxed – until the laws that govern one sex expand to cover both – we will not be free to work for our own salvation: be it political, social or industrial. (*OB* 28)

Besides stressing the need to continue the fight for equality, Mattie explains what led suffragettes to adopt more extreme militant tactics. She also denies the associations of Pankhurst's group with criminality and terrorism. Although the emphasis of Mattie's lecture is on the suffragettes, and their role as the first organised group of women activists in Britain, she acknowledges the Victorian roots of the movement. To accomplish this goal, she goes back to Harriet Taylor Mill's essay "The Enfranchisement of Women", published five decades before the creation of Pankhurst's union of suffragettes in 1903, presenting it as one of the movement's key inspirations:

> fifty years of petitioning, fifty years of discussion, fifty years of meetings, of canvassing of promises made and of promises broken. The birth of militancy came after a long and painful confinement: sweet reason, it became evident, had changed nothing – sweet reason could safely be ignored by those in power. What was needed was a new approach, a shift from the gently audible to the boldly visible. (*OB* 30)

Through this passage, Mattie illustrates how militancy emerged as a strategic response rather than a desire for criminality, reinforcing the novel's revisionist didactic approach.

Like Evans, Muir starts her summary of women's suffrage in the nineteenth century. Both Agnes and Mattie go back to the 1832 Reform Act, which did not consider women as eligible voters. In her letter from 1902, Agnes quotes parts of a speech given by Annie Belshaw, a Scottish suffragette who denounced women's exclusion from the Act and their association "with warped characters and undeveloped ones [as] a resource unused in political and social life" (*SC* 111). Similarly, Mattie notes that while women were excluded from voting under this Act, a "vastly increased number of wastrels and drunkards, adulterers, wife-beaters and employers of child labour were able to stroll freely into a pooling booth in order to ordain the governance of this country" (*OB* 30). Mattie further alludes to the Reform Act when responding to a question about suffragettes' acts of arson:

> Could I ask you in return, if you recall reading about the Reform Act riots of 1831, in which the gaol and the Bishop's House in Bristol were set on fire, with many deaths resulting, all in the name of representation? And yet no male reformer has ever been asked to apologize for this. Men have been allowed to use bloodshed and disorder to gain their freedom – have been celebrated for their passion in pursuit of the vote – and yet the suffragettes, who hurt not a single person with their fires, are condemned. As Thomas Fuller once said, "Abused patience turns to fury." By that point, we were furious, and justifiable so. (*OB* 33)

Mattie recalls Pankhurst's premise of not hurting anyone in the name of the Cause (Purvis 2013, 584). In turn, she challenges claims that associate the suffragette movement or some of its members with terrorism. Emily Davison, a renowned suffragette known for acts such as setting fire to a post office (Boyce Kay and Mendes 2018, 139) and for her fatal protest at the 1913 Epsom Derby, where she was struck by the King's Horse (Raeburn 1973, 248), has sometimes been presented on such terms (Pugh 2013, 5). As suggested by historian Simon Webb's book title, other suffragettes involved in acts of bombing and arson have also been referred to as "Britain's forgotten terrorists" (Webb 2014). Webb argues that the violence conducted by these women has been frequently omitted from the history of suffrage and questions the extent to which such violent tactics dragged out, rather than contributed to the achievement of the franchise. Evans responds to this affirmation through the figure of Mattie, who considers these practices useful, and argues that she does not regret "these acts of vandalism [but] that no government buildings were burned to the ground, no electrical companies, no factories –we wasted our powder on half-built houses and tea pavilions, and were therefore seen as private nuisance rather than a public threat" (*OB* 33). The first lesson in *Old Baggage,* then, seems to be oriented to reclaim the image of the suffragettes as Britain's (at times) forgotten feminist pioneers and not as its "forgotten terrorists". The number of details that Mattie provides in her first lecture not only reflects her charisma and rhetorical skills but also evinces that the novel is well-documented. Evans' solid research reaffirms the double didacticism of her work in that it is oriented to teach a lesson both within the context of the story and outside its narrative frame by speaking directly to its readers.

Suffragette City's initial lesson is specifically oriented to claim the role of Scottish women, both suffragists and suffragettes, in what has been historically considered the First Wave of Feminism. Hence, readers learn that not all the women who struggled for the vote in the UK were English or were fighting from England, which is a recurrent idea in mainstream narratives. In her earlier letters, Agnes mentions the Independent Labour Party to which Emmeline Pankhurst and her eldest daughter belonged before the formation of their union (Purvis 2000, 115). The party is introduced as the first to represent both male and female workers for universal suffrage and then mentioned to signal suffragettes' excision from it because of the lack of consideration that socialist men had for women's suffrage. Agnes also refers to the Glasgow Suffrage Society, the Scottish branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) that she joined in 1903, a year after its foundation. In this way, Muir also puts suffragists in the picture and vindicates the role of the NUWSS in the fight for equality, which, together with Pankhurst's union, was the most representative organisation for women's suffrage during the Edwardian period (Nym Mayhall 1995, 321). Yet, the emphasis of the novel is on the suffragette campaign, and its role in Scotland. Agnes abandons the suffragist union to work with the emergent militant Scottish faction arguing that "the WSPU are right: there is nothing like causing a bit of trouble to get some attention, and perhaps the more polite Glasgow Suffrage Society should consider such action" (*SC* 157). From this moment onwards, Agnes' letters focus on the suffragette movement in Scotland and her contributions to it.

The second lesson taught in the novels contests another recurrent misbelief: the assumption that women got the vote only and exclusively due to their work during wartime. *Suffragette City* is set at the turn of the twentieth century but gives an overview of the women's suffrage movement from 1899 to 1912. Similarly, although the action of *Old Baggage* develops mainly throughout 1928, the novel reviews the suffragette campaign from its formation until its dissolution in 1918. As Nym Mayhall notes, many suffragettes wrote their biographies and diaries during or after the war but focused on the pre-war campaign to disclaim the idea that women achieved the vote thanks to their jobs during the conflict (1995, 321). This misconception trivialises and underestimates women's efforts and sacrifices, and Muir and Evans dedicate a significant part of their novels to describing suffragettes' advances before the war. *Old Baggage* explicitly challenges this assumption when, during her lecture, Mattie responds to a "predictable question" from a member of the audience:

> But surely you must admit, Miss Simpkin, that the vote was ultimately granted only because of the sterling work by ladies on the home front, while their menfolk were away in the trenches? Surely it was responsibility, and not *irresponsibility*, that won it for you in the end? (*OB* 37; emphasis in the original)

Mattie responds that it was "only the Government's fear that militancy would return after the war that forced the bill through" (*OB* 37), emphasising that suffragettes' militant tactics, rather than wartime labour, secured the vote. Her lecture thus highlights women's efforts and sacrifices. Similarly, Muir includes Agnes' letters to recount key suffragette deeds in Scotland before the war.

Both novels trace the origins of suffragette militancy to a single event: Anny Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst's interruption of a Liberal Party meeting in October 1905 (*SC* 155; *OB* 31). Perceived as the first militant act of protest, this action marked a turning point. It promoted the involvement of many women in activism (Billington 1982, 672) and introduced the technique of heckling male politicians into the campaign (Boase 2018, 157). In *Suffragette City*, Kenney and Pankhurst's deed becomes a pretext to provide details about the fight in Scotland. Agnes explains that these women inspired a group of Scottish suffragettes. Led

by another Scot, Mrs. Flora Drummond, they confronted the Prime Minister during a speech in Glasgow. Agnes provides further details of the Scottish struggle for the vote by naming some of its key icons such as Helen Fraser,[8] "the Scottish organiser of the Cause", with whom Agnes creates a WSPU branch in Glasgow (*SC* 190). She also mentions Jane Esdon Brailsford,[9] with whom she travels to Newcastle to participate in militant acts. Agnes also recounts her participation in a large suffrage demonstration in Edinburgh, a speech in Kilmarnock, a meeting in Springburn, and her attendance at Mrs Pankhurst's speech in Aberdeen. These references to events across Scottish cities illustrate the suffragettes' commitment to spreading their ideology nationwide (Elliott 2018, 320).

Evans underlines the spectacular nature of some key marches and protests of the campaign to remark on the suffragettes' pre-war contributions. Mattie's lectures, which she illustrates with images and delivers with her outstanding rhetorical skills, are in themselves performative acts. They also draw attention to the movement's performative character. For instance, she shows a picture of the 1908 march to Hyde Park to draw attention to the spectacle of women's attire. Those who had been previously imprisoned are wearing the Holloway uniform, a simple woollen dress, and the mob cap, which Mattie describes as "making even the prettiest face look like a peeled turnip" (*OB* 35). Providing her own sensory description of the events, The Flea, who assists Mattie with the slides, explains that:

> the photographs could never convey the true feeling of those processions – how, when the march had started, and the bands were playing, and the air was dense with cheers and song, it would feel as if a friendly wind had lifted you up and was carrying you along with a thousand friends – as if you could never be alone again, as if darkness had been outlawed, as if the world had already been won. (*OB* 35)

Another picture projected during Mattie's talk, and described to the readers, is from the 1911 Coronation Procession, in which Mattie and The Flea participate disguised as historical figures, alongside Christabel Pankhurst. The displayed print features "Joan of Arc on a white charge, pennants, floats, choirs, brass bands, societies of every kidney – the Actresses' League, the Theosophists, the Tax Resistance League – and somewhere towards the centre, the Pageant of Historical Women" (*OB* 36). Evans' reference to Joan of Arc, the WSPU's role model, and femininity icon (Nym Mayhall 2003, 85-87), hints at suffragettes' reliance on the ornamental body in public performances. Adding to the spectacular character of what became the largest suffragette march, the Coronation procession is presented as

> the most thrilling day The Flea had ever known, the atmosphere not importunate but gloriously triumphal, and she could never forget, over the bitter, furious years that followed, her own bafflement that it *hadn't worked* – that the government had watched a display of such discipline, such civilization and culture and wit, and had then simply turned its back. (*OB* 37; emphasis in the original)

This event proves a turning point because the government's disregard was taken by the WSPU as a cue to adopt more extreme militant tactics (Nym Mayhall 2003, 107). As Mattie adds: "we were betrayed, over and over again, by politicians [and] were left, finally, with no choice but to use the argument of the stone, and the hostage of our own mortality" (*OB* 37). By revisiting the militant actions that furthered women's enfranchisement, Mattie also refutes the notion that suffragettes were terrorists. This anticipates the novels' third lesson: that they were victims rather than perpetrators of violence, sometimes forced to fight back in self-defence.

Through this third lesson, Muir and Evans invite readers to learn about the sacrifices many of those women were willing to endure, as well as the abuses and brutality they suffered both in prison and at the hands of the police. In her lecture, Mattie stresses that violence against suffragettes was constant from the beginning, not only after they turned to militancy:

> More injuries were received at the hands of stewards at political meetings than in other theatre of protest – women asking questions of Cabinet Ministers at public discussions would be dragged from the hall, punched and kicked, shaken and indecently manhandled, often in full view of an unprotesting audience. I myself have a permanent depression in one calf resulting from a steward jabbing the ferrule of his umbrella directly into the muscle. (*OB* 31-32)

Similarly, in *Suffragette City* readers learn about Agnes' first-hand experiences of mistreatment and incarceration in various of her letters. In an epistle from 1911, she explains that she served her first prison sentence after breaking the windows of several government buildings. This protest was directed against Asquith's refusal to consider women's enfranchisement in the 10th Women's Parliament. Her imprisonment is presented as "more punishing mentally than physically" (*SC* 247). However, she notes the police brutality towards the suffragettes during the protest, and the unbearable conditions of her trip to jail in a black police van, known as Black Maria, whose dark compartments "barely seated one person and smelled of rank sweat and fear" (*SC* 249).

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[8] Muir offers some biographical facts about Helen Fraser (1881-1979) throughout the novel, such as her former artistic work in embroidery (Ewan et al. 2006, 127), her position as the first Scottish salaried suffragette, and her role in spreading the WSPU campaign in Aberdeen (Atkinson 2018, n.p).

[9] From Brailsford (1874-1937) Muir highlights the deed that she carried out in Newcastle, where she went in 1909 to protest against forced feeding during one of Lloyd George's meetings. Brailsford attacked a police barricade with an axe that she had previously hidden under her clothes and was imprisoned as a result but released after three days because of her husband's influential position (Atkinson 2018, n.p).

Far from "sanitising" the past (Hughes 2005, 6) or romanticising the suffragette figure, both novels exhaustively and realistically recreate the unpleasant experiences of suffragettes in jail.[10] In the same 1911 letter, Agnes describes the poor quality of the food, despite suffragettes' supposedly better position in prison:

> Under Churchill's rule 234A,[11] the suffragettes have much better conditions than the ordinary prisoners, who are fed a pint of watery grey porridge and lumps of bread for most meals, unless they get potatoes or suet pudding. Some days, on our so-called better diet, we were given potatoes and something approaching meat stew, although many identified that meat as horse. The only egg I got must have been months old, and smelled like it too, and the cocoa, which was our supper, often had little strings of meat in it. Clearly the cooks never bothered to clean the pans. (*SC* 249-250)

According to Geddes, suffragettes, like political prisoners placed in the First Division, were entitled to better meals, their own clothes, and access to writing materials (2008, 81). Yet Agnes reports a general lack of hygiene, noting that "after seven days without a bath [the possibility of using their personal attire] was less than pleasant" (*SC* 250). She finds it impossible to accurately describe the smell of the cells, which were "barely seven feet long, and equipped only with a straw mattress on planks and rich with bed bugs, a wooden shelf that pretends to be a table, and a stupid wee stool" (*SC* 250).

In *Old Baggage*, Mattie also recounts the precariousness of jail in her initial lecture. She shows a picture of a First-Division cell[12] for male political prisoners, and compares it to the ones reserved for suffragettes:

> It looks rather comfortable, doesn't it? – a decent-sized room, an adequate bed, a window, a wash stand, a chair, even a small table on which one might put one's belongings. One might almost be in a hotel [...]. If you were a Fenian throwing bombs at English policeman, then this is where you would find yourself after conviction. By contrast, a suffragette found guilty of persistently ringing a Cabinet Minister's doorbell with the aim of receiving a simple answer to a simple question would be placed in one of *these* – a second-division cell. (*OB* 34; emphasis in the original)

Mattie denounces the bad conditions endured by the suffragettes and describes their cells as being half the size of those in the First Division and lacking natural light. Like Agnes, Mattie points at Holloway's scarce sanitary measures and cleanliness when she mentions that her head was infested with lice after she left prison: "I had to massage petroleum jelly through my hair and then comb out the corpses thrice daily for a month in order to rid myself of them" (*OB* 33-34).

To illustrate the harsh conditions that women went through in Holloway, Evans and, more explicitly, Muir include references to their hunger strikes and the forcible feeding they underwent. While serving her second and longest prison sentence in 1912, Agnes writes a letter to her friend and comrade Kirsty to tell her that her fellow suffragettes are considering a hunger strike "not because the food is so bad – it is hardly worth eating anyway" (*SC* 271) but because they are no longer granted the status of political prisoners. Agnes explains her predisposition to go on a hunger strike but not on a thirst strike and claims that the fasting does not worry her; "it's the forcible feeding that sounds like the worst form of torture" (*SC* 271). Yet, she admits that "none of this, however unpleasant, does anything but good for the Cause" (*SC* 271), which reflects suffragettes' commitment to the fight. Once released, Agnes writes a letter to her sister narrating her experiences of forced-feeding experienced during six weeks – the last two of which she spends in isolation in a hospital cell. She points out the cruelty of the prison authorities, who replaced the disgusting food with "fruit and freshly baked rolls" (*SC* 292) to lure suffragettes into eating and declares that "[she] had to imagine the basket was made of plaster to keep [her] hands off it" (*SC* 292). Agnes also expounds on the cruelty of the tools frequently used to force-feed the women – the clamps, the funnel, the tubs, and the liquid that looked like milk (Williams 2008) – and to the doctors in charge, who came from lunatic asylums and were experts in the technique:

> I shut my eyes, but the doctor was trying to shove a sharp metal clamp in my mouth. I tasted blood as it cut into my gums as he tried to get a grip and gagged on my own saliva. Then more horribly, the clamp began to push my jaws slowly apart, so they were held in a frozen scream. The pain was unbearable, and all through my back and chest from the tension and the fear. I thought I heard one of the wardresses laugh, and the humiliation, the helplessness was awful. With me coughing and spluttering, they shoved inches and inches of the rubber tube into my throat. I gagged and gagged. I shut my eyes again but I could feel it ripping down the passage to my stomach, and suddenly there was something cold down there, the milk or whatever. I could not taste it, only feel its cold against the pain which seemed to last for ever. Then they unscrewed the vile contraption from my mouth and it was over. They left, and I lay shivering and crying on the hospital mattress, holding my pillow, curled up like a miserable child. (*SC* 293-294)

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[10] Extensive descriptions of the appalling prison conditions experienced by the suffragettes can also be found in Walter's *Nevertheless She Persisted* (2018), set in Holloway during 1913, and in Ajay Close's *A Petrol Scented Spring* (2015), which offers a detailed narration of Doctor Hugh Ferguson Watson's forced-feedings of the Scottish hunger-striker suffragette Arabella Scott.

[11] In 1910 Winston Churchill, Home Secretary at the time, established rule 243A that granted suffragettes special treatment and certain privileges, but not the status of political prisoners (Grant 2011, 135). This was the actual reason that brought the first hunger striker, Marion Wallace Dunlop, to resort to this practice.

[12] What appears in the photograph is not a real prison cell, but a replica recreated for a WSPU exhibition held at the Prince's Skating Rink in 1909.

Muir's detailed accounts of Agnes' forced-feeding challenge the trivialisation of suffragettes' self-scarifying acts and attest to the violation of their bodies and the humiliation felt during the process (El-Rayess 2011, 31), in turn reinforcing the novels' third lesson: suffragettes were, in fact, victims rather than perpetrators of violence.

The last lesson provided by the novels is the de-romanticisation of the suffragette movement. This is especially evident in *Old Baggage*, which incorporates internal conflicts and divisions within the movement, particularly those resulting from Emmeline Pankhurst's decision to stop the campaign with the outburst of World War I. In an interview, Evans herself notes that after the global conflict "there wasn't just one cause at this point, there were many and therefore there was no overall feminist movement at this point in history, there were lots of little movements [...] and because of that some of the energy seemed to have dissipated" (2018b). These words are reproduced almost verbatim in the novel when The Flea reflects on the spirit of women's suffrage, observing that "all that unity and passion, all that wild energy, had dissipated" (*OB* 99).

Evans explains that she included Mrs Pankhurst's funeral in the novel to further illustrate the discrepancies and instability of the campaign: "I imagine there were people who felt they didn't want to go, who felt they had been betrayed at the beginning of the First World War" (2018b). Diverging opinions about the suffragettes' leader are evident when The Flea and Ethelwynne, an ex-suffragette, discuss her weak health and upcoming funeral. Ethelwynne considers Pankhurst a traitor for abandoning the Cause to support the war and for joining the Tories. By contrast, The Flea admires Mrs. Pankhurst for initiating the militant campaign that helped suffragettes to achieve the franchise reflecting on "that frail figure already in her fifties at the height of militancy, who had yet survived repeated arrest, assault and starvation" (*OB* 166). Later, Mattie engages in a similar discussion, deeming Mrs. Pankhurst a "magnificent human, but possessed of human failings [arguing that] she paid no heed to those who had followed her most loyally" (*OB* 187). Yet, she attends the funeral alongside other prominent suffragettes such as Anny Kenney, Charlotte Despart, General Drummond, Ethel Smyth, and Pankhurst's daughters. These examples illustrate the internal tensions and uncertainties faced by the early feminist movement and invite readers to reflect on the problems besieging feminism at present. Hence, the four lessons in these novels serve a clear revisionist goal, offering a corrective and more nuanced view of the suffrage movement, which undermines some of the most recurrent misapprehensions transmitted by previous historical narratives.

4. Conclusion

Muir's *Suffragette City* and Evans' *Old Baggage* function as didactic novels addressed to gain knowledge about the suffragette movement and dismantle misconceptions about its members and methods. They exemplify a form of revisionist didacticism that engages readers in a process of un/learning the roots of feminism. These novels demonstrate the power of neo-historical fiction to both educate and revise our understanding of the past, particularly, the history of women's suffrage. By focusing on historical settings that deviate from those of mainstream narratives and on overlooked figures like Helen Crawfurd and Edith Garrud, Muir and Evans not only correct historical omissions but also provide new insights into the complexities of the suffragette movement. Narrative devices such as Agnes' letters and Mattie's lectures further enhance the pedagogical impact, making readers active participants in the un/learning process.

The revisionist agendas pursued by Evans and Muir serve not only to reimagine the history of the women's suffrage but also to ensure that the lessons embedded in their stories resonate with contemporary audiences, encouraging them to rethink and re-engage with this pivotal moment of feminist history. By revisiting the origins of the movement, the novels restore the suffragettes' legacy as foundational feminists whose militant actions were born out of necessity, not criminality. They also offer an overview of the movement to emphasise that the suffragettes' fight for the vote was a culmination of decades of activism, rather than a reward for wartime service, thereby challenging reductive historical narratives. Both novels vividly recount the brutal treatment suffragettes experienced to shift their perception from instigators of violence to victims who had to resort to self-defence in the face of systemic oppression.

The authors' unfaltering depictions of these realities counter any romanticised view of the movement, instead offering a more nuanced understanding of the personal and the collective sacrifices involved. The inclusion of women's suffrage inner conflicts further contributes to the de-romanticisation of the movement highlighting its complexity and the diverse motivations and ideologies of its participants. Through these series of lessons, the novels weave well-researched historical detail with compelling narrative, inviting readers to reconsider how we remember the fight for women's rights and ensuring that the sacrifices and struggles of early feminists are neither forgotten nor oversimplified.

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