WOMEN AGAINST THE VOTE
for Raymonde Hainton and Joanna Bazley
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Acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations

### ORGANIZATIONS

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GFS</td>
<td>Girls’ Friendly Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAC</td>
<td>Joint (Parliamentary) Advisory Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>London County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGAC</td>
<td>Local Government Advancement Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCW</td>
<td>National Council of Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLOWS</td>
<td>National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUSEC</td>
<td>National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUWSS</td>
<td>National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies</td>
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<td>NUWW</td>
<td>National Union of Women Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>WI</td>
<td>Women’s Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>WLGS</td>
<td>Women’s Local Government Society</td>
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<td>WNASL</td>
<td>Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League</td>
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<tr>
<td>WSPU</td>
<td>Women’s Social and Political Union</td>
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### ARCHIVES

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>BLPES</td>
<td>British Library of Political and Economical Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bodl.</td>
<td>Bodleian Library, Oxford</td>
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<tr>
<td>LMA</td>
<td>London Metropolitan Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td>LMH</td>
<td>Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSE</td>
<td>London School of Economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCL</td>
<td>University College London</td>
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An Introduction to Women’s Anti-Suffragism

British women who opposed their own enfranchisement were ridiculed by the supporters of votes for women and have since been neglected by historians. These two dimensions of their negative reputation are closely linked. Campaigners for the vote were early and prolific historians of their own movement. During the campaign, and especially in the aftermath of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, they made extensive efforts to memorialize the path to victory through published life histories and tales of suffrage adventure,¹ providing later researchers with influential retrospective accounts to set alongside the lively sketches and parodies of anti-suffragism which had multiplied in suffrage publications during the heat of the battle. The suffragist leader Mrs Fawcett wrote in 1912 of the ‘inherent absurdity of the whole position of anti-suffrage women’, claiming their 1889 manifesto ‘had the effect which similar protests have ever since had of adding to the numbers and activity of the suffragists’.² In her adulatory 1928 account of The Cause, Ray Strachey claimed that the anti-suffrage Leagues formed in 1908 and 1910 ‘soon began to afford great delight and comfort to their opponents by the ineptitude and futility of their ways’.³ The image of women’s anti-suffragism emerging from early suffrage histories was one of bizarre, narrow-minded irrelevance. It suited suffragists to portray an opposition


² M. Fawcett, Women’s Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1912), 45. She went on to predict, correctly, that ‘future generations will probably mete out no very kindly judgment to the women who petitioned against women’. Ibid. 46.

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dominated by stubborn male politicians and brutal male law-enforcers, rather than by fellow women. Basic assumptions about the counterproductive nature of organized anti-suffragism, and the anomalous stance of its women leaders, have certainly strongly influenced later accounts. Modern histories of suffragism all too often ignore its committed female critics, and fail to evaluate the widespread support for their views. Thus the women anti-suffragists have become eclipsed within an opposition which was itself marginalized by historical failure.

Though not hard to explain, the limited and unflattering reputation of women anti-suffragists is in other respects rather surprising. Women’s roles in the British anti-suffrage movement were important, and in some ways distinctive. Women provided a good deal of the initiative and most of the hard work behind the organized opposition, as well as the majority of its declared supporters. In 1913 more than two-thirds of the direct subscribers to the anti-suffragists’ central office were women; at branch level the proportion of women subscribers rose to more than five out of every six. Their ideas and activism were often overshadowed by a self-consciously masculine leadership in the years before the First World War, but did not go unrecorded. Women oppositionists also wrote life histories. Some provided rueful, self-explanatory reflections on the lost cause. All offered indirect evidence of the social and political milieu which encouraged substantial numbers of intelligent, energetic women to commit themselves to anti-suffragism. A minority of leading women antis contributed powerfully to contemporary theoretical debates over the nature of womanhood and women’s potential contribution to national life, producing books and articles which deserve the same careful reading as those of suffragist authors. Larger numbers participated in the public debate on the Woman Question through contributions to newspapers and periodicals, including the daily press, the many monthly journals aimed at both male and female middle-class readerships, and the Anti-Suffrage Review, published from 1908 to 1918. Some women expressed their hostility to the vote by collective resistance through the 1889 Appeal Against Women’s Suffrage, and later through the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League (1908–10) and the National League for Opposing Woman

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4 Edward Mitchell-Innes, in an unnamed newspaper dated 29 Apr. 1913, replying to an article by the suffragist Lady Chance which criticized the NLOWS for being ‘financed and controlled by a few rich men’; 1,005 men and 2,375 women subscribed to the central office, while 145 NLOWS branches (of 270 in total) listed men and women separately, totalling 2,830 men and 16,148 women. Bodl., NLOWS Scrapbook 24, 2474d70.


6 See esp. the writings of Ethel Colquhoun, Louise Creighton, Ethel Harrison, Violet Markham, Gladys Pott, and Mary Ward.

Suffrage (1910–18). Women provided (and collected) nearly half a million anti-suffrage petition signatures before the war, and formed the vast majority of the 42,000 enrolled membership of the Women’s League and the mixed-sex National League, which joined forces in 1910.⁸

These numbers compare not unfavourably with the signed-up membership of the main suffrage societies in the same period. The Women’s Social and Political Union had around 5,000 members and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies around 50,000 members in 1914.⁹ However, there was a sharp contrast between suffragists and their opponents in terms of political visibility, whether in the form of publications and speech-making, or including the more spectacular exploits of legal and illegal militancy. Anti-suffrage women were usually reluctant to court publicity for their political beliefs. Organized campaigning for the anti-suffrage cause was continuously handicapped by the refusal of its female supporters to mount platforms, attend meetings, pen leaflets, or sometimes even sign petitions. This was partly a logical extension of their reluctance to take to the stage of parliamentary politics. It was also a reflection of their positive commitment to a paradigm of womanhood characterized by altruistic femininity, devotion to family duties, and inconspicuous public service in the extended domestic setting of local communities.

From the 1870s up to the moment of enfranchisement, both male and female anti-suffragists claimed emphatically that the majority of British women did not want the parliamentary vote. This claim has considerable plausibility, despite the suffragists’ best efforts to disprove it and the relative political passivity of many anti-suffragists. A history of women’s opposition to the vote must attempt to test the movement’s unflagging confidence in its mass female support. Large numbers of women were publicly silent on the subject of the vote, but demonstrated their loyalty to ‘true’ rather than ‘new’ womanhood through alternative channels. This study will extend beyond the organized anti-suffrage movement into other socially conservative women’s organizations, including religious, philanthropic, and imperialist associations and the National Union of Women Workers, the main ‘umbrella’ organization for female social service. It would obviously be unjustifiable to appropriate all these organized women retrospectively to the anti-suffrage cause. Each of the non-political women’s organizations also contained many suffragist members. By 1913 the suffragists had even succeeded in provoking a public schism by asserting their superior strength at leadership level within the National Union of Women Workers. Many other women’s organizations had ruled suffrage debate out of order, in

⁸ Membership figures and numbers of signatories were given sporadically in the Anti-Suffrage Review, e.g. in the report on the Annual Council Meeting of the NLOWS in July 1914, when Lady Tullibardine claimed 42,367 subscribing members and 15,810 non-subscribing ‘adherents’ for the League. These figures included the Scottish membership. Anti-Suffrage Review, 69 (July 1914), 110.

recognition of divided opinions and in order to avoid diverting their members’ attention from constructive work for other causes. These organizations provide evidence of widely shared women’s interests, activities, and gender beliefs which together afforded a favourable setting for anti-suffrage propaganda, or at the very least for indifference to suffragism.

The non-political women’s movement gives insight into the shared views of suffragist and anti-suffragist women on issues other than the vote, enabling us to revisit the franchise debate from a less confrontational perspective. From the socially conventional viewpoint of the main middle- and upper-class women’s organizations, anti-suffrage arguments seemed far from absurd. Instead, they can be reinterpreted as part of mainstream female opinion on desirable gender roles and on women’s positive role in national life. In 1914 the largest non-political women’s organizations were the Anglican Mothers’ Union (1875), the Girls’ Friendly Society (1876), and the National Union of Women Workers (1895); after 1918 they shared their place with the non-denominational Women’s Institutes (1915) and Townswomen’s Guilds (1928). Though the leadership of all these organizations was mainly middle class, members included large numbers of working-class women influenced by similar gender ideals. Womanly responsibilities for home and family took very different forms for poorer women but were often a considerable source of pride and self-respect, and a bulwark of unarticulated gender conservatism.

Suffrage as well as anti-suffrage discourse acknowledged the power of women’s domestic devotion. But the evidence of social historians and contemporary social commentators, as well as of mass-membership women’s organizations, seems to show that suffragism remained a minority preoccupation across all social classes. Women’s reluctance or inability to become involved in national politics was a source of great encouragement for the opponents of votes for women. Beyond the more conservative women’s organizations lay a still broader hinterland of wholly unorganized female support, or prospective support, for anti-suffragism. Most ‘ordinary women’ have left very limited direct evidence of their political and social outlook. Our understanding of their views rests mainly upon indirect evidence, and upon the interpretative skills of modern historians working from diverse sources to restore their lives to the historical record. This book will relate its conclusions to research now available on the apolitical stance of many poorer women,¹⁰ as well as drawing upon research into middle-class and working-class women’s organizations. It will also relate anti-suffrage ideals to the fictional worlds enjoyed by many middle-class women, now widely acknowledged to have defined as well as expressed important aspects of their social outlook and

¹⁰ e.g. E. Roberts, A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890–1940 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), introd. She acknowledges the diversity of the working class, whilst drawing important general conclusions upon gender outlook which many other historians working in different regions of Britain have tended to substantiate.
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self-image. It is suggestive that some of the most widely read Victorian novelists, and some of those whose reputations have declined most steeply since the turn of the century, were committed anti-suffragists. These women writers reassured a generation of socially conventional women readers by providing a view of womanhood which they enjoyed and with which they could empathize: only to be cast out into the wilderness as later generations found new heroines and new inspirations.

To some extent, the opinions of the silent majority will always remain a mystery. How far were the anti-suffragists justified in counting upon uncommitted, non-suffragist women (as opposed to declared suffragists or anti-suffragists) as rank-and-file opponents of votes for women? The confidence of organized anti-suffragism in its passive supporters is demonstrated by the anti-suffrage Leagues’ enthusiasm for a referendum on the franchise issue. By this means, passive women would be prodded into voicing their views. The referendum issue emerged in a variety of forms during the suffrage debate, without ever securing parliamentary support. Meanwhile female anti-suffragists attempted to fill the evidence gap by organizing their own tests of public opinion. Polling of women municipal voters on the franchise issue produced remarkably consistent results around the country in the pre-war years. When unofficial ballots were conducted by anti-suffrage women canvassers, or sometimes by pre-paid postcards, opposition voters generally outnumbered supporters of women’s franchise by two to one. This outcome was only slightly marred by the suffragists’ success in producing smaller-scale results equally favourable to their own cause, sometimes in the same districts. Despite their strenuous attempts to invalidate anti-suffragist tests of public opinion, suffragists were usually to be found arguing that the vote would

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11 Literary sources have been used by many historians researching middle-class attitudes, e.g. J. A. Hammerton, "The Perils of Mrs Pooter": Satire, Modernity and Motherhood in the Lower Middle Classes in England, 1870–1920, Women's History Review, 8/2 (1999), 261–76. Again, the diversity of the middle classes demands acknowledgement, as does the evidence of nuanced changes of domestic outlook over the decades. M. J. Peterson, Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) investigates the opposite end of the middle-class spectrum. K. Flint, The Woman Reader 1837–1914 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) provides an interesting discussion of the (far from straightforward) relationship between middle-class women’s reading and their evolving opinions.

12 e.g. Charlotte Yonge, Eliza Lynn Linton, Mary Ward, and Marie Corelli.

13 There was some support for a referendum from members of Asquith’s cabinet in 1911–12, and also from sections of the national press. The anti-suffragists moved from canvassing for petition signatures to advocating a referendum, but there were uncertainties over who should vote in it. The referendum idea resurfaced for a final time in 1917, when the NLOWS argued that major constitutional reform should not be introduced without a direct mandate. It seems likely that, in the pre-war period at least, the antis were influenced by the encouraging outcomes of suffrage referenda in the United States, rather than simply by despair over their lack of parliamentary support as Martin Pugh suggests in March of the Women, 165.

14 Results were published in the Anti-Suffrage Review as they were received, and summarized in The Anti-Suffrage Handbook (London: National Press Agency, 1912).

15 See Fawcett, Women’s Suffrage, 52. The suffragists also did their best to discredit the antis’ results by collecting evidence of malpractice. See K. Courtney’s circular letter to NUWSS members
benefit all women in practice, rather than that all women actively wished to have the vote. The demand for an official referendum of women found little favour in suffrage ranks, suggesting that they were far less confident than the antis in the breadth of their female support.

This book will focus more extensively upon the lives and opinions of the anti-suffrage movement’s women leaders, though some attempt must be made to reassess general support for the anti-suffrage cause. Leadership is defined here to include distinguished writers and opinion-formers, as well as collective, organized activism by influential women within the anti-suffrage campaign itself. The emphasis upon a prominent minority rests partly upon the availability of evidence, but is also justified in other ways. Women leaders were important because they helped to shape and articulate the convictions of their women followers. Their reasons for opposing the vote, and for eventually founding an organization specifically devoted to its defeat, require more thorough analysis than they have so far received either from contemporary critics or from many later historians. Far from being the pawns of male antis, the leading ladies of anti-suffragism drew their enthusiasm from deeply rooted convictions about womanhood, nation, and empire. Their views developed over many years, and did not remain static. Importantly, their views on the suffrage issue were meshed into beliefs, attitudes, and activities in many other areas of their lives.

In order to understand their political thinking and its influence, it is necessary to follow the trajectory of their activities beyond public affairs and into family life. Historical controversy continues over the significance of ‘separate spheres’ ideology during the Victorian age and after. This study contributes to the debate by showing how, for many socially conservative and anti-suffragist women, public work and family duties were overlapping and mutually reinforcing, rather than in tension with each other. For other anti-suffrage women, the political platform of the opposition may have helped to provide an escape from the dilemmas involved in a pursuit of less ‘womanly’ paths in their personal lives. As adult women, anti-suffrage leaders were usually participants in multiple causes and extensive social networks, so that the influence of family life and personal experience became part of a web of wider encounters with ideas, organizations, and individuals. Some also participated, both as readers and writers, in the transnational literary networks which played an influential part in shaping contemporary views on the Woman Question.¹⁶ No single woman personified the essence of anti-suffragism, but analysis of the shared ideas and affiliations of the leading women shows common threads, as well as underlining the need

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¹⁶ These networks provide the focus for Lucy Delap’s forthcoming book, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters, 1900s to the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). I am grateful for her generosity in permitting me to read this important book before publication.
to acknowledge diversity of individual outlook. Retrospectively, it is possible to reconstruct broad groupings of individuals, motivations, and ideas within a many-sided discussion of womanhood which extended far beyond the narrow issue of the parliamentary vote.

The choice of anti-suffrage commitment was not always a lasting one. Women who changed their minds on the vote feature prominently in the history of anti-suffragism. Most conversions swelled the suffragist ranks, especially in the later stages of the campaign, though a few women are to be found moving in the opposite direction. For the purposes of this book, women have been included within the scope of anti-suffragism if they expressed open opposition to votes for women at any stage in their lives. A small number of influential women have also been included whose opposition to women’s suffrage was muted or indirect, but adequately evidenced and of contemporary significance to the anti-suffrage cause. Of course it is necessary to clarify the extent or the limitations of anti-suffrage commitment with reference to each of the individuals concerned, so far as available evidence permits. Reasons for changing sides also require careful consideration, for they reflect the impact of changing times upon the anti-suffrage movement as a whole as well as upon individuals. Often the move from opposition to support for the vote involved a much less dramatic shift of opinion than might be expected. Levels of commitment were also very variable, and sometimes hard to measure. The suffrage controversy was not usually the main priority even for the leading anti-suffrage women activists. Other women who had little or no enthusiasm for female suffrage deliberately abstained from any form of activism on this issue. Their work and interests lay elsewhere, and in some cases they were reluctant to enter into divisive political debate as a matter of principle. Women who took opposing views on the female franchise usually respected and even admired each other’s wider public work. At the height of divisive suffragette militancy, anti-suffrage and suffrage women worked amiably together for a wide range of social and political causes, and maintained personal friendships which were underpinned by shared values.

Diversity was an important characteristic of the anti-suffrage movement and is well illustrated by a study of its leadership. Both male and female leaders took up their roles for a variety of reasons, and attempted to imprint the movement with their own ideas. Internal debate was inevitable, though unwelcome within the campaigning Leagues as they attempted to present a united front to their suffragist opponents. Especially unfortunate for Edwardian anti-suffragism was

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17 e.g. Louise Creighton, Beatrice Webb, and eventually Violet Markham.
18 e.g. Elizabeth Wordsworth and Florence Bell.
19 Evidence of political abstention is difficult to locate, but exists in the correspondence among women attempting to gather signatures for the 1889 Appeal. See Ch. 6, below.
20 Close friendships across the suffrage divide included those between Louise Creighton and Kathleen Lyttelton (before 1906), Mary Ward and Louise Creighton (after the latter’s conversion to suffragism in 1906), Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins, Violet Markham and May Tennant.
the emergence of internal debate along gendered lines. The organized anti-suffrage movement became a site for difficult negotiations between men and women leaders between 1910 and 1914, despite the public deference of the female antis to masculine wisdom. The existing historiography of the anti-suffrage movement remains overwhelmingly dominated by Brian Harrison’s classic study, published in 1978, which presents an unrivalled analysis of the male leadership and of the parliamentary context of the suffrage campaign.²¹ This book introduces fresh perspectives on the movement as a whole by restoring female leaders and women supporters to their due prominence. Harrison presciently observed in his concluding Bibliographical Note that many important areas of women’s history remained under-researched, including the history of ‘the unorganised woman, in home and workplace’ and ‘the social and political role of the upper class woman’.²² Elsewhere in his book, and with particular reference to disagreements between men and women in the National League, he referred to the gender imbalance of his own primary sources.²³ The current book has the advantage of being informed by nearly three decades of subsequent women’s history research. This has provided the essential context for a study which focuses on women’s ideas and activism, and draws largely upon female sources, despite their relative paucity alongside the parliamentary record and the extensive publications and archived correspondence of the male anti-suffragists.

Debates between male and female anti-suffragists throw a particularly dramatic light upon the diversity of their cause. However, the diversity among anti-suffrage women themselves is another important aspect of the present analysis, and has received even less historical attention. Anti-suffrage women prided themselves on the unity of their movement, in contrast to the proliferating, squabbling suffrage societies, but their unity was far from complete. Divisions of outlook, policy, and tactics within the suffrage movement have been carefully researched in recent years. The 1990s were a particularly productive decade in suffrage history as historians redefined the chronology, location, ideas, and activities of the movement.²⁴ The present book shares the academic directions of this work, in that it aims to discover what drew individuals and groups of women

²² B. Harrison, Separate Spheres, 258 and 259.
²³ Ibid. 136.
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towards a gendered political viewpoint, what issues divided them, what caused some to become active in support of their views, and what shaped the nature and outcomes of their activism. Suffrage history has been greatly enriched by the growth of a more complex understanding of women’s political motivation and methods, and can be further enhanced by a more complex analysis of its opponents. Suffragism and anti-suffragism developed within the same historical context and in close reciprocal relationship to each other. It is certainly necessary to explore the mutually defining nature of these opposing movements. However, it is still more important to understand their connectedness within a single spectrum of debate which was highly variegated rather than dichotomized into contrasting opposites.²⁵ Suffrage historians have led the way in exploring the diversity of ideas and self-expression amongst those who supported votes for women. Anti-suffrage women now deserve equally respectful analysis, based upon their life histories, their writings, and the full range of their public work.

Many of the new approaches which have shaped revisionist histories of suffragism are of equal relevance to the history of its female opponents. To begin with, the development of both suffrage and anti-suffrage ideology evidently needs to be more fully contextualized within the intellectual, political, and social history of its period. Debates over religious faith, imperialism, social evolutionism, social science, and the nature and consequences of democracy are as important to the histories of suffragism and anti-suffragism as controversy over gender itself. The campaign methods of each movement need to be understood as the product of a modernizing society, in which a growing range of media catered for the demands of an increasingly educated, urban public, as well as challenging the two movements’ creativity and will to innovate. The social class dimensions of both suffragism and anti-suffragism have much to teach us about their supporters and their politics. Whilst suffrage history has reclaimed its working-class heroines and its connections to the labour movement, anti-suffragism consolidated behind an upper middle-class leadership with strong links to the political aristocracy, but only a token interest in enrolling working-class women to fight their own fight against enforced democracy. Women anti-suffrage leaders sought to emphasize the social mission underlying their anti-suffragism, but rarely doubted their duty to speak on behalf of poorer women, rather than alongside them. Local contexts are revealing in the study of anti-suffragism, as well as suffragism. Both movements were led from London, the seat of the political establishment which would decide the issue of votes for women. Both also set out to foster regional and local organization, with contrasting degrees of success. The anti-suffrage Leagues never fully succeeded in establishing a national network of branches with


²⁵ This point is strongly argued in L. Delap, ‘Feminist and Anti-Feminist Encounters in Edwardian Britain’, *Historical Research*, 78/201 (2005), 377–99.