



Suffragette, The Battle for Equality

Books Reviewed:

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This has obviously been a labour of love for David Roberts. He has written and illustrated all of its more than a hundred big pages, and his passion, humour, outrage and admiration are clear on every one of them, as is his careful research. As the title suggests, his interest, as with most of the centenary commemoration, is with the militant wing of the British movement for women's suffrage in the years before the First World War, but he acknowledges the longer patient struggle whose constant frustration led to radicalism and the histories and continuing battle for women's rights in other times and places. That he has decided to illustrate everything has its disadvantages. For instance, acknowledging the WSPU's famous cat and mouse poster, he doesn't include it but describes it, which doesn't convey its power in the same way. There are, of course, existing photographs and images of many of the people and incidents described, and he uses none of them. Rather he creates an Edwardian world in his illustrations that is his own distanced version of the time, with galleries of subtly characterised portraits of the major players, cartoon coppers with truncheons, stuffy parliamentarians, and determined middle class ladies, to whose coiffure and couture he pays the minutest attention even as they are marching and fighting in the streets. Roberts' love of fashion and design is everywhere apparent, as is the influence of Art Nouveau. This is one of the huge strengths of his approach, for it acknowledges in a way that I have seen nowhere else, the creative flair of suffragette agitation: the colours, the banners, the pins and badges; the turning of the arts of women's domestic confinement (Roberts alludes early in the book to Victorian samplers) into powerful forms of mobilisation. Another strength is that, as an illustrator, he can go into places where cameras were either absent or not welcome. We can see the very moment when the fire-bombed pillar box starts to smoke and inside the cell where a weak and struggling suffragette is being ruthlessly force-fed. Above all, what Roberts achieves is a fine balance between a retrospective recognition of the inherent absurdity of the situation, of the denial of the vote itself and the extremes to which it drove perfectly respectable women, and the time's darkest and its more glorious aspects, the cruelty with which the status quo was defended and the heroism of those who fought for change.

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