

On the centenary of the formation of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in 1908, **Julia Bush**, author of a book on the subject, explains why some women campaigned against enfranchisement

WOMEN AGAINST THE VOTE

ON 28 October 1910, Violet Markham took the platform of the Manchester Free Trade Hall and, before an audience of hundreds of male anti-suffragists, boldly declared: "I regard women as superior to men, and therefore I don't like to see them trying to become men's equals".

Male opposition to women voters was perhaps understandable – as a defence of vested interests during a period when widespread anxiety over 'the Woman Question' was being inflamed by suffragette militancy. More surprising, and much less well-known, is the fact that many intelligent women also believed passionately that the parliamentary vote should be denied.

Like most women opposed to political equality, Violet Markham was confident of her own abilities and those of her sex. She felt that women's citizenship was different from that of men, but no less important. Their special qualities and womanly expertise could find fruitful outlets elsewhere, for example in the world of female philanthropy and expanding local government as well as in the all-important sphere of family life.

Some leading women even toyed with the idea of a separate Women's

Chamber at national level, providing discreet feminine guidance to the elected male Parliament.

Female opposition to the vote manifested itself in the formation of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in July 1908. Two years later, this was to merge with a smaller Men's League to create the mixed-sex and male-dominated National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage. Standing alongside Violet Markham on the Manchester platform was the future president of that organisation, Lord Cromer. His opposition to votes for women was predicated upon a belief in feminine weakness and incapacity for public work, especially the work of ruling the British Empire.

Lord Curzon, former viceroy of India, succeeded Cromer as League president. Despite the fact that women continued to provide the majority of the League's members, Curzon had no hesitation in declaring that they lacked "calmness of temperament" and "balance of mind" especially "in emergencies or on occasions of emotional excitement".



A c1909 illustration offers some advice for giving suffragettes who sabotage letter boxes the boot

A separate Women's Chamber would provide discreet guidance to the male Parliament

The key questions posed by women's suffrage, were "would the Empire be less safe than it was at present? Would it, in fact, be safe at all?"

Holding such divergent views, it's perhaps inevitable that male and female anti-suffragists found it very hard to mount a harmonious joint campaign. By February 1912, Cromer had become so frustrated with recalcitrant female colleagues that he wrote to Curzon: "I really have not the health, strength, youth or, I may add, the temper to go on dealing with these infernal women".

Meanwhile women who opposed the vote often found themselves working alongside suffragists within the non-political women's movement. The suffrage debate was important, but by no means the only problem which concerned public-spirited female

reformers during the Edwardian era. The most active anti-suffrage women were also keen supporters of what has been called 'civic maternalism', a composite attempt to improve the lives of women and children through female-inspired reforms in such areas as childcare, health, housing and moral welfare. Within many voluntary associations and local government bodies, the conservative supporters and progressive opponents of women's suffrage pursued common causes.

Manly men, womanly women

Anti-suffrage women believed in fostering gender differences. In theory, the roles of men and women were complementary, and society would successfully evolve to a higher level under the influence of manly men and womanly women. This fundamental belief was developed throughout the anti-suffrage campaign. And even before the creation of the Anti-Suffrage League in 1908, there were plenty of other places for women to express their views. The female 'antis' usually belonged to one or more of three informal groups: maternal reformers, women writers and imperialist ladies.

Maternal reformers practised motherly social work through a myriad of female-led organisations. There was, for example, a strong strand of anti-suffragism within the Girls' Friendly Society and the Mothers' Union, linked in turn to evangelical Anglicanism.

Mary Ward, the most prominent leader of female anti-suffragism from 1889 onwards, led an unsuccessful campaign to disassociate the National Union of Women Workers from the suffrage cause. She had good grounds for believing that this group of female philanthropists included much opposition to the vote. As another maternal reformer put it, "Citizenship lies not in the suffrage but in the participation of each individual in effort for the good of the Community".

Anti-suffrage women writers included the best-selling novelists of the day. Mary Ward's famous novels attacked suffrage militancy and divorce, while Marie Corelli wrote anti-suffrage tracts as well as mystical, sentimental romances. Charlotte Yonge, the favourite novelist of most Victorian girls, produced a trenchant book against feminism, as well as fictional heroines who learned the error of their independent ways.

The cause of the British Empire was invoked differently by male and female 'antis'. While the leading men feared the consequences of 'petticoat government' for Britain's global status, women argued that their duties as wives, mothers, educators and community-builders had a vital imperial dimension. "The greatness of any nation is proportionate to the strength of its family life", wrote Violet Markham, in an article titled *The True Foundations of Empire*. Protecting British motherhood from the snares of parliamentary politics was a patriotic duty. The positive arguments advanced by these women provide an interesting contrast with the alarmism and misogyny of most anti-suffrage men.

Women successfully built a network of anti-suffrage branches across Britain, but they needed male collaboration in order to press their case in Parliament. By 1914 the parliamentary cause was on the brink of defeat, though the National League had over 42,000 mainly-female members. Their history deserves to be rescued from the ridicule of the victorious suffragists, and the neglect of later historians. **H**

A badge produced for the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League



Julia Bush is a senior lecturer in history at the University of Northampton

JOURNEYS

BOOKS

Women Against the Vote by Julia Bush (OUP, 2007) is available from **BBC HISTORY BOOK CLUB** price £31.50

Timeline: The battle to deny women the vote

1889 *An Appeal Against Women's Suffrage*, supported by over 2,000 female signatories, is published in *The Nineteenth Century Journal*.

1895 The National Union of Women Workers debates women's suffrage.

1906 Sophia Lonsdale writes to *The Times* urging a female anti-suffrage petition. Thirty seven thousand signatures are collected in two weeks.

1908 Women's National Anti-Suffrage League is launched.

1910 The Women's League and a smaller Men's League merge to form the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.

1914 Anti-suffrage women turn to war work, rejecting its use for political propaganda.

1917-18 Women lead last-ditch resistance to female enfranchisement.

1918/1928 Parliament grants votes for women. National League is dissolved.

THREE KEY FIGURES OF THE ANTI-SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT



The maternal reformer

Mary Ward
(1851-1920)

"The woman suffrage movement can be defeated - it must be defeated - and by women themselves"

Mary Ward was an active social and educational reformer, as well as a novelist. Author of the 1889 *Appeal Against Women's Suffrage*, founder of the *Anti-Suffrage Review* and chairman of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, she campaigned tirelessly against a reform which she believed damaging to women, as well as dangerous to the national interest.



The woman writer

Eliza Lynn Linton
(1822-1898)

"The rule of women becomes the precursor, as it is the sign, of general decay"

Eliza Lynn Linton was an influential writer who stridently championed the anti-suffrage cause for 40 years. She played on contemporary social fears, predicting that women's suffrage would overturn the gender hierarchy, emasculate men, and bring chaos in its wake. Though a signatory of Ward's *Appeal*, she was regarded by the other women as an impossible colleague.



The imperial lady

Margaret Jersey
(1849-1945)

"The enfranchisement of women is a step which might end in a national disaster"

Margaret, Countess of Jersey, became chairman of the National League after years of experience in leading other organisations, including the upper-class, imperialist Victoria League. Her commitment to the Empire arose from a stint in Australia as the governor-general's wife, and was tied to her faith in maternal reform and dislike of political partisanship among both men and women.