A Martyr for Suffrage

Kristen Thomasburger

On June 4, 1913, a woman stood in a crowd of people at Epsom eagerly awaiting the running of the first race of the British Derby Day. The woman watched as two sets of horses ran past her on the track, and then she ducked under the railing and ran into the middle of the track. As she ran onto the track the King's horse was running toward her, and as the horse neared, she threw her hands up in the air, perhaps to stop the horse, but to no avail. The King's horse trampled the woman and she lay on the track suffering a severe head injury.[1] This woman was not just a regular spectator amongst the crowd who had suffered an unfortunate accident; the woman was Emily Wilding Davison, a member of the Women's Social and Political Union and a suffragist with a militant past. Davison suffered from her head injuries for four days, and then she died without ever regaining consciousness. Without her explanation of the event and explanation of whether or not her act was an act of suicide, speculation arose about the reasoning behind her fatal trip out onto the track. Davison's fellow suffragists used the confusion over Davison's act as a way to gain sympathy for their cause as they made it known to the world that Davison died fighting for women's right to vote. However, even though Davison suffered her injuries while carrying two suffragist flags under her coat, she did not intend to become a martyr that day at

[1] Gay L. Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular Martyr?" *Social Research* 75, no. 2 (2008): 461.

Epsom. It was only through the propaganda of the suffrage movement that Davison's accidental death turned her into a martyr for suffrage.[2]

The British suffragists granted Davison martyrdom, hoping that the death of this woman would bring sympathy and support from the British people. The suffragists needed this support for their cause because many British people looked down upon the suffragists and their militant actions. In order to understand why the suffragists used Davison's death as a ploy to gain sympathy for their cause, the history of the British suffrage movement must be briefly discussed. In the early twentieth century, Great Britain experienced an uprising of women demanding the right to vote. British suffragists became militant during this time under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst.[3] Their militant activities, such as arson and bombings, resulted in many suffragists' arrests. As a result of the hatred towards the suffragists' campaign, and the suffragists' unwillingness to be submissive to the law enforcement personnel, many of these women faced cruel and horrific conditions during their incarceration.

During incarceration, many suffragists resorted to desperate tactics, such as hunger strikes, with the hope that the government would take their message seriously. Instead of acknowledging the validity of the suffragist's campaign, the government and prisons implemented the practice of subjecting the women to harsh punishments such as force-feeding them through a tube to suppress their militant nature. The brutal tactics proved to be debilitating to the health and mental status of the women who were imprisoned, and occasionally the suffragists were left

[2] Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular Martyr?" 461.
[3] Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular Martyr?" 462.

permanently disabled and many died while they were still incarcerated.[4] One suffragist who felt the wrath of these brutal tactics was Emily Wilding Davison. Davison was a devoted suffragist whose militant tactics often resulted in her arrest. Her stories of the horrific treatment of women inside the prisons flooded the headlines of *The Times* during the early twentieth century. It was Davison's intention to show the people of England the brutality that the suffragists faced while fighting for their cause.

Emily Wilding Davison first made headlines after her desperate attempts to avoid being force-fed while incarcerated. Davison's name inundated the British papers during her involvement in the suffrage campaign due to her militant nature. Davison worked as an activist for the women's suffrage movement for many years. In 1909, Davison first made headlines when, after being arrested, she had gone on a hunger strike in order to show her resolve for the cause of suffrage. In attempts to avoid being force-fed, Davison barricaded her cell door in order to keep the prison guards out of her cell. The prison guards then placed a hose pipe into her cell and attempted to fill her cell with water, nearly drowning her. The freezing water made her ill, and she was then confined to bed due to her illness.[5] After her release from prison, Davison attempted to collect damages from this incident of assault, but with no avail. This result was largely due to the fact that that while in prison it was Davison's "avowed intention of breaking every rule of that institution, and she did in fact do so from the time she went."[6] Davison's story of abuse during her imprisonment flooded the newspapers and

[4] Joyce Kay, "It Wasn't Just Emily Davison! Sport, Suffrage, and Society in Edwardian Britain," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 10 (2008): 1338-54.
[5] "The Treatment Of Women Prisoners," *The Times*, January 20, 1910.
[6] "Action by a Suffragist," *The Times*, January 11, 1910.

brought about attention to the mistreatment of the women suffragists who were locked away in prison. Suffragists, such as Davison, used these stories of ill treatment as reasons for people to support the cause for suffrage and Davison continued her fight after this incident.

In 1911, Davison wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* expressing her outrage at the paper regarding a negative story about working class women taking their children into a public house. Davison's responded to this story by saying that women would have refused to bring their children into a pub if "women had possessed a feeling that they were responsible citizens of their country."[7] This letter not only supported the women among the British working classes, but also displayed Davison's feelings about the lack of suffrage for women in Britain. Davison felt that without women being given the right to vote, they would not be viewed as actual citizens of Britain. The anger and frustration felt by the failed sense of citizenship ignited her militant nature and disrespect for government institutions. Though her many militant actions—including a bomb threat—made headlines in the paper, her most famous act for suffrage took place in June of 1913 during the opening race on Derby Day at the racing course at Epsom.

On June 4, 1913, the middle and upper classes of Great Britain gathered together at Epsom to enjoy the opening races of the horseracing season, on Derby Day. The spectators not only experienced the excitement of a close horse race, but many also witnessed a horrific and fatal act displayed by Emily Davison. According to *The Times*, after the opening race, Davison "rushed from the rails on to the course as the

[7] Emily W. Davison, "Liberal Measures Affecting the Working Classes," *The Times*, October 13, 1911.

horses swept round Tattenham corner."[8] After Davison ran onto the track, she encountered the King's horse, Anmer, and when the jockey was unable to avoid her, he was forced to trample over her leaving her fatally injured with a head wound.[9] This desperate act by Davison was done in order to bring the attention of the Derby's spectators to the cause for suffrage. Davison had run out onto the track in order to wave the suffragist colors and evoke support from the women and men in the crowd. However, this event did not bring forth sympathy for the suffrage movement, this violent display invoked rage amongst the British people and Davison's actions were criticized in both the British and the American press.[10] While the suffragists hailed her as a champion for their cause, the general public saw her as a miscreant female who suffered from a mental disease. Though there were some positive responses, and some negative, from the public, the publicity caused by this act made the quest for women's suffrage in Britain known internationally, with Davison heralded as its champion. Davison's fatal accident made her a legend in the eyes of British suffragists and they used her death to make her a martyr for the cause of suffrage.

The distaste for the militant suffragists and their cause, by the British government and the people of Britain, was a result of the forceful nature portrayed by the suffragists and their refusal to become subservient. These women strayed from the typical submissive behavior that was expected of them, and took on stronger more dominant qualities not usually hailed as lady like. This new behavior and the militant acts that the suffragists committed were not seen as strong and independent qualities of a woman, but rather it was often seen as a result of a woman

[8] "A Memorable Derby," *The Times*, June 5, 1913.
[9] "A Memorable Derby," *The Times*, June 5, 1913.
[10] "The Folly of the Militants," *New York Times*, June 10, 1913.

suffering from a mental disease. After Davison's death, there were many who thought Davison was a lunatic and not of sound mind when she ran onto the race course. It was the common belief, immediately following the accident that her troubled mental state was the reason she threw herself in front of the horses that day.[11] This claim of madness was evident in all the newspapers articles from that day, as both the *New York Times* and *The Times* hailed her as "mad." The common belief that Davison had gone insane was due to the fact that many believed it was her intention to die that day on the track; however, according to the coroner's jury for Davison's case, her death was ruled as an accident.

In order to dismiss the claim that Davison was insane and had intended to die, the coroner's jury called on Captain Henry J. Davison, Davison's brother, to attest to her sanity. While at the coroner's jury Captain Davison stated that his sister "was a woman of very strong reasoning, faculties, and passionately devoted to the women's movement."[12] Since a respected member of the British military attested to the sanity of Davison, the charge that she suffered from mental illness was dropped and the conclusion was made that Davison was of sound mind and body when she entered the course.

Testimonies by witnesses present at the racecourse that day suggested that this event was accidental. One witness stated that "it was my impression, when she was trying to get under the rail, that, believing all the horses had passed, she intended to run into the center of the course, as many people do at the Derby, to get a view of the horses dashing up the straight."[13] Testimonies such as these show that it was

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[11] Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular Martyr?" 463-5.
[12] "The Suffragist Outrage At The Derby: Verdict Of Misadventure," *The Times*, June 11, 1913.
[13] "Militant Throws King's Derby Colt," *New York Times*, June 5, 1913.

commonplace for the public to run onto the course after the race concluded, and it was not considered an action that would have been taken by a person suffering from a mental disease. This evidence shows why it would not normally be considered out of the ordinary to run onto the track, but because she was a woman and because she was associated with the suffrage movement, the public saw her act as an act of lunacy. Many claimed that she wanted to die and those claims justified the arguments against her mental status. However, it has been concluded by historians that on the day of the Derby, it was not Davison's intention to die, because she had purchased a round trip ticket from London to the racing grounds at Epsom.[14] This shows that Davison had no intention of becoming the hero and martyr for suffrage that day; she only wished to stand in front of the crowd to show her support for the cause. It was not Davison who made herself a martyr for the women's movement, it was her sister suffragists that used her untimely death as a story that would bring publicity to the fight for suffrage.

The idea that Davison was willing to die, on that June day in 1913, was not only born in the stories wielded by the press, but also in the propaganda used by Davison's fellow suffragists. The women suffragists claimed that Davison willfully laid her life down that day to die for their cause. A fellow suffragist, Mrs. Mansel, spoke to *The Times,* and discussed a meeting that she and Davison had prior to her trip to the racetrack at Epsom. Mansel stated that Davison

> went with the expressed intention of stopping the King's horse. To show that she was contemplating how her action might end, she even expressed a wish as to where to be buried...Miss

[14] Gullickson, "Emily Wilding Davison: Secular Martyr?" 462.

> Davison had the conviction that a great tragedy would have to come and that she herself would lay down her life.[15]

With these claims, Mansel had intended to build up pride amongst the community of suffragists and display Davison as a true and selfless martyr for their cause. However, these claims were propagandistic in nature and were used to give evidence to Davison's alleged martyrdom.

The claims made by Mansel are evidence of the propaganda that was spread by the suffragist community. To refute the claims made by Mansel, many articles in both *The Times* and the *New York Times*, gave evidence that it would have been impossible for Davison to specifically target the King's horse. The coroner's jury also discussed this matter, and when asked whether it was possible for Davison to target the King's horse, the coroner stated, "I do not think it would be possible the way they were bunched together."[16] Regardless, the suffragists used the event of Davison being trampled by the King's horse, as a symbol of women being stepped on by the British government. These stories of grandeur made the public sympathetic to Davison's plight and the suffragists' cause, and masses of people attended the funeral of the slain suffragist in both the support of the victim and in support of the cause.

The propaganda surrounding Davison's death, produced by the British suffragists, enabled a grand funeral for Davison, with a massive crowd and a funeral procession throughout London. *The Times* reported that, "in many of the streets the crowd was so thick that it was with utmost difficulty that the police kept a clear passage for the

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[15] "Extol Miss Davison in Plea to King," *New York Times*, June 10, 1913.
[16] "The Suffragist Outrage At The Derby: Verdict Of Misadventure," *The Times*, June 11, 1913.

procession."[17] Due to the amount of press coverage of the Davison story and the martyrdom granted to Davison by the other suffragists, crowds came to the funeral to honor a hero. This was helpful to the suffragists' cause—the massive crowds made it appear that the suffrage movement had the support of many British. However, not all that attended the funeral were there to support Davison and the cause. From the crowd there were shouts of, "Three cheers for the king's jockey."[18] Critics of women's suffrage saluted the death of a militant woman that they saw as a nuisance to society. This showed that even though there were many who were sympathetic to the suffragists' plight and the martyred Davison, the movement was still hated by many men of Great Britain who saw no need for women to have the right and the power to vote.

Though male compassionates for suffrage were in a minority in Britain, there were some who were inspired by Davison's passion for the cause. In honor of Davison's actions at Epsom, a man repeated these actions two weeks later at the racecourse at Ascot. *The Times* reported, " A man put himself deliberately in the way of the leading horse in the race for the Gold Cup...The man, who carried a revolver in one hand and a flag of the suffragist colors in the other, has been identified as Mr. Harold Hewitt."[19] This action by Hewitt showed how Davison's action and death not only motivated other suffragist women, but also motivated men who believed in the cause for the women to gain the right to vote. Though the press dismissed him as a lunatic, just as they did Davison, this action demonstrated the passion that people felt toward the cause.

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[17] "The Suffragist Outrage At The Derby: Funeral of Miss Davison," *The Times*, June 16, 1913.
[18] "The Suffragist Outrage At The Derby: Funeral of Miss Davison," *The Times*, June 16, 1913.
[19] "Outrage at Ascot," *The Times*, June 20, 1913.

Though Davison was not intending to be a martyr, her intentions inspired people to support the cause for which she so desperately fought.

Davison will be remembered throughout history as the woman who willingly gave her life for the right of women's suffrage. During the time in which she was associated with the suffragists' cause, she experienced abuse by government officials and prisons. However, Davison stood behind the cause, accepting the harsh punishments, because she was a firm believer that women were citizens and should be treated as citizens by having the right to vote. She wanted to rally as many supporters for her cause as she could, and by so doing, she met a tragic end. After accidently being trampled by the King's horse she died while supporting the fight for suffrage. Through press and propaganda, Davison's sister suffragists used her death as an aid to their cause; they immortalized Davison with their stories and press releases and by granting her martyrdom for suffrage. Though Davison did not intend to become a martyr for the cause, her story inspired others to act against the injustices of the British government, and her name—and death—became immortalized in the history of the women's suffragist movement in Britain.

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