

[00:00:30.730] - Alys Mumford

Hello and welcome to the second episode in our miniseries of On the Engender, exploring Scottish Women and the Vote. After the last episode in which the excellent Dr Esther Breitenbach gave us a whistle-stop tour of the women's suffrage movement in Scotland. This episode here is from Ruth Boreham talking about her research into how women in Scotland protested their exclusion using the tools they could, the 1911 census. Enjoy.

[00:00:54.550] - Alys Mumford

Ruth Boreham works full time for the Scottish Book Trust on the Book Bug early year's programme. But outside of work, she does a lot of historical research, particularly at the minute around Mary Somerville and also around the suffragettes and the 1911 census in Scotland, which is what she's going to be focusing on today. She also volunteers for a charity that works out in Nepal, ensuring children there get an education. As she gets older, these are her words, not mine - she says she is getting more interested and passionate in gender equality and ensuring she does as much as she can to improve things in her own small way. A favourite phrase of hers is 'many piddles can make a puddle', and I got through that without giggling. Over to you Ruth, thank you.

[00:01:31.450] - Ruth Boreham

Let me briefly explain that phrase. I was talking to someone after I'd been part of the procession earlier this year saying how I didn't feel like I was doing enough and she said, no every little drop can help. And she gave me that phrase, 'many piddles make a puddle'. So I keep that in my mind and it always makes people laugh, which helps. I'm going to very briefly talk about the 1911 census and how the suffragettes, and it was definitely the suffragettes, not the suffragists, how they used it as a form of protest. It was first proposed by the Women's Freedom League back in June 1910 that this would be a potential way of striking back at the government. After all, it was the government that was going to be coming around and asking these questions. But it was really decided on the 6 February 1911, when the King's speech was made and there was no mention in that speech of a conciliation bill or women's suffrage. That's when the Women's Freedom League, on their next edition of their newspapers went right that's it, we're boycotting the census. As soon as they announced it at the end of February, the WSPU, the Women's Social and Political Union also said, Great, we will get involved. They started producing a lot of information about different ways that you could do it. And luckily, all of the newspapers, for example, the Dundee Courier reported this verbatim. So anybody, if you picked up a newspaper could find out exactly how to boycott the census. This was a brilliant way of getting the message out. You didn't need to belong to any of these organisations. You could just read your local paper and they would tell you exactly what to do.

[00:03:10.090] - Ruth Boreham

So I've been looking at what happened up here in Scotland. There was a fantastic amount of work that's been done down in England. There's a brilliant book called Vanishing for the Vote by Jill Liddington that looks down in England. England, of course, had a lot of focus for a long time because of people like Pankhurst, who you may have heard of before, briefly. Actually one little aside, it's brilliant up here in Scotland, Emmeline Pankhurst wasn't often thought of as the head of the WSPU. And there are some fantastic newspaper reports where they're talking about WSPU meetings. And they're talking about the wonderful people talking like Teresa Billington-Greig, et cetera. And then almost at the bottom, there's a little paragraph going, oh and some women called Mrs Pankhurst stood up as well. I love that. [Laughter]. Anyway back to the census, what they didn't realise, the WFL, when they first proposed this boycott were the questions that were going to be asked. And anyone who does family history research at all will know that the 1911 census, there were different questions being asked on top of the usual name, age, et cetera. There was a real fear by a lot of people quite high up in society that the poorer working class were outbreeding, the "more intelligent" in quotation marks, middle classes. There were a large group of people who believed that the poor were poor and sick because of their bad genes, nothing to do with their horrendous living conditions, their working conditions, lack of food or anything like that. It was their bad genes. And if the government brought in these public health reforms that they were talking about, then the poor will just continue to have lots of poor and sick children because of their bad genes. And the middle and upper classes would disappear. So they wanted to find out if this was true. So on the census, they were going to ask, how many years have you been married, how many children were born of that marriage and how many

children are still alive? There was also a real worry that women working was having an impact on the fertility rates. So there were lots of questions being asked around what type of employment women were doing. But you have to remember that this was a household schedule, that women were not filling in themselves.

[00:05:27.010] - Ruth Boreham

It was filled in by the head of the household, i.e. the man. So the man was being asked lots of questions about the woman over which she had no control over the questions or the answers. And by the time that the boycott was going ahead, they realised these questions. And that was another added reason why they felt that the census should be boycotted. Now, unfortunately, in Scotland, the wonderful household schedules, the individual records. And you may have seen some of the examples from down in England, where women have written across the sheets, no vote, no census or my favourite, no persons here, only women and other things like that. They don't exist in Scotland anymore. They were destroyed a while ago. I have no idea why. I don't think anyone's owned up to that, because I would go and just tell them what for if I find out who it is, but what we do have are some of the enumerator returns.

[00:06:20.662]

[record scratch sound effect]

[00:06:21.310] - Alys Mumford

An enumerator is the person employed to gather census records. They delivered a householder's schedule and instructions to each household with the head of the household required by law to complete the form detailing all those persons who was sleeping in the house that night. These details were then compiled by the enumerators and submitted.

[00:06:38.980]

[record scratch sound effect]

[00:06:39.790] - Ruth Boreham

What I'm doing at the moment is going through every single enumerator return to see whether there are any indication as to whether people were protesting and not filling it out. But first of all, I want to show you a return from here in Edinburgh, on Nicolson Street, there was a fantastic place called Café Vegetaria. Miss Lucy Burns, who was head of the Edinburgh branch of the WSPU, hired it for the night and she refused to fill it in, as you can imagine. So what the enumerator got were two policemen to stand opposite Café Vegetaria and in the morning when the women were leaving, they went, uhh I reckon she's 25. Write that down. Oh no, she is 40. So we have six pages of nothing but ages, guesstimate ages, over 100 women. And there were some men as well. Over 100 women were in Café Vegetaria and the policeman were just standing outside the next morning writing down guesstimate of ages. Thereby they were still being counted, even if we didn't get any more information. But what were they doing in Café Vegetaria? Well, there was lots of newspaper reports about this and I just want to read out a little bit because it contains one of my favourite phrases ever:

[00:07:54.850] - Ruth Boreham

The keys of the café were in the possession of the suffragists - suffragists, no, they were suffragettes, but the terms were interchangeable - from Saturday night and many were in the premises early in the day. But during the evening, when the protesters were expected to arrive, a large crowd of the - vote monopolising sex [laughter] - love it. I could just finish there, I think. But no, the vote monopolising sex gathered round the entrance to the building to hoot and jeer at the women as they passed in. At first the women had some difficulty in penetrating through the crowd, but later the four uniformed police kept the bystanders back to the curb stones. At 12:00, the last of the protesters, having arrived, there was a gay crowd of 100 or so, assembled on the rooms of the café and a buzz of preparations going forward for the entertainment to follow. Half of the large room was cut up by the improvised curtains behind which living wax works were being set up and disguises were being assumed amid ringing laughter. It goes on to talk about this live wax work show. Essentially, the women dressed up and kind of posed in lots of different scenes. They were separated into three sections. So you had romantic, political and domestic. After they did this for about an hour and a half.

They had tea, coffee and buns, then those who wanted to slept upstairs while those who didn't played games. At 05:00, they were woken up for music. And then they had a debate, will not giving women the vote make woman, man and man, woman? With Miss Burns making speeches as the anti, against the debate. Much to the amusement of the audience. And then they left the building and went home or went to work and had breakfast.

[00:09:45.490] - Ruth Boreham

So essentially, we had over 100 women get together, dress up, play games, have a bit of a sing-song, eat tea, coffee and buns, and then go home. That's what they did in Café Vegetaria. It was brilliant. [Laughter]. Dundee was another one of the big centres for the WSPU, and they got a few of them together. And they got a reporter round who then took a photograph of some of the women that appeared in the paper talking about this census protest. They then marched to the Nethergate, 61 Nethergate, where the WSPU was based. But again, the enumerator was there. And because they were very well known, he was able to write down some of the names, again he's guessing some of the ages. But what is particularly interesting - on the census return there's always a column about relationship to head of household. So you have the head of household who fills it in and then everybody else is related to that head of household. Be a family member, a lodger, or a servant, et cetera. There wasn't really an option if you were a suffragette protester. So the enumerator had to try and work out what best to put down out of the options that he had. He decided the best option for these suffragette protesters was to write down inmate. Other people instead of going round to houses and buildings, they stayed outside. So although we don't have the original individual household schedules, we do have in the National Records of Scotland, an awful lot of letters written by enumerators to the Registrar General talking about the real problems they have, sometimes naming individuals or sometimes talking about seven people who've decided to stay out in a wooden erection - no idea what that is - and then disappeared. Sometimes the mind boggles when you look at historical documents.

[00:11:31.150] - Ruth Boreham

But I also want to very briefly mention this woman here, Ethel Moorhead. Sometimes the newspapers up in Scotland called her the leader of the Scottish suffragettes. She became quite important in the suffragette movement, if you like, in Scotland because she was the first woman in Scotland to be force fed. But back in 1911, she's living in Dundee with her father, and she refuses to fill out the schedule. So what does she do? Nothing - until the enumerator comes around because he reckons that her father will give the information that he needs. And this is taken from a letter written by the enumerator saying: Well, I had just read the first paragraph of your letter, Miss Moorhead, his daughter, came hastily into the room, challenged my right to enter her home without first obtaining her authority and perpetually commanded me to leave at once. I begged her not to interfere with me in the performance of my duty and told her I would listen only to her father. Then she ran off to another room and almost instantly returned with a large brass bell, which she kept constantly clanging to drown my voice while I was endeavouring to make myself heard to her father. And as you can see from the census, he didn't get all the information he needed. Although we don't have the household schedules, we do have two of them. Two of them have magically survived, and this was a brilliant way of writing messages on, so no votes, no census, and I refuse to fill this in until I get the parliamentary franchise. These messages wouldn't have been seen publicly, of course, they would only have been seen by the enumerator and the Registrar General.

[00:13:06.670] - Ruth Boreham

And one last person to talk about. Behind me is a census record for a property in East Lothian and a fantastic woman called Catherine Blair, who in 1917 set up the Scottish Women's Rural Institute and did an awful lot of work fighting for the rights of women in lots of different ways. In 1911 she was living with her husband and four children on their farm, and on census night she took two of her daughters and her female servant went to stay the night in a shed so that she was therefore the head of the household and could fill out the schedule herself. What I love about Catherine, though, and this is the only example I've been able to find so far in Scotland under occupation - yes, she puts farmer's wife, but she also writes suffragette. That's how proud she was. I still have a lot of research to do, but in terms of numbers, it doesn't seem a huge amount of people were involved. The fact that they were writing down guesstimates of ages meant that these women were still being counted, although they

weren't giving all of that information in. But this is a brilliant way of showing lots of different ways that you can protest against something. And if nothing else, I want you to go home and look for a large brass bell [laughter] and keep it handy because you never know when you might need it.

[00:14:19.400]

[Applause]

[00:14:25.790] - Alys Mumford

Thank you so much to Ruth for sharing her research with us, telling the forgotten stories of Scottish women, and of course, gifting us the phrase many piddles make a puddle. Next time we'll hear from the inimitable Mukami McCrum about the legacy of the vote and the exclusion of women of colour from the stories we tell about Scotland's social movements. In the meantime see you all at Café Vegetaria?

[00:14:50.430] - Amanda Stanley

This episode of On the Engender was hosted by Alys Mumford and was recorded live at Engender's AGM in Edinburgh with guest Ruth Boreham. The podcast was produced by Amanda Stanley on behalf of Engender and the jingle featured throughout was written and performed and remixed especially for this series by Bossy Love. You can follow Engender on Twitter @EngenderScot and join in the by using the hashtag #OnTheEngender.

[00:15:15.710]

[Jingle plays out]