

REVIEW

Leslie Parker Hume. *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 1897-1914*. New York: Garland, 1982. Pp. iii, 246. US\$50.

THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION of the past twenty years has produced much valuable scholarship on the history of women. Understandably, the initial focus was on the militant Edwardian suffragettes led by Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst. Recently, a second wave of work has appeared which does not concentrate on women gaining the vote but analyzes them as mothers, wives and workers. Much of this literature has been strongly interdisciplinary, often in a neo-Marxist mode, weaving together traditional history, sociology, psychology and medicine.

Largely left behind in these voluminous outpourings has been that venerable Victorian organization, The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), whose origins go back to John Stuart Mill and Lydia Becker in 1866 but which only took coherent organizational form in 1897. In that year, under the careful guidance of Millicent Fawcett, some seventeen constitutionally oriented women's suffrage societies were federated. The full story of this remarkable and important organization has now for the first time been told by Leslie Parker Hume. All scholars of modern British history, as well as all feminists, will welcome this exhaustively researched, scrupulously fair and insightful book.

Hume demonstrates how the NUWSS was cast in the tradition of the great Victorian pressure groups, of which the Anti-Corn Law League was the most famous. The leadership and the rank-and-file were staunchly Victorian in their belief that the Liberals would give women the vote. The story is one of slow disillusionment with the Liberal Party which under Asquith missed a major opportunity to remain, after 1918, a vital force in British life by granting women, or some of them, the vote. In her assessment of the destructive effect of the Women's Social and Political Union upon the women's movement before 1914, in terms of gaining the vote, she is at one with Brian Harrison's conclusion in his splendid book *Separate Spheres* (1978). Dr. Hume is also correct in concluding that the educational work of the NUWSS made British males ready to accept a degree of women's suffrage in 1918. Readers of Russell will be intrigued by her warm tribute to his by-election campaign for the NUWSS at Wimbledon in the 1907 by-election.

No doubt this excellent book will provoke controversy among many feminists, especially among those who defend the WSPU. I am confident, however, that Dr. Hume's judgments will be vindicated and that the late-Victorian ladies of the NUWSS will finally be given justice.—R. A. R.