

## ***A long and loving association and friendship: Esther Knowles and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence***

**Lucienne Boyce**

*Quotations from Esther Knowles's letter to Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence dated 25 February 1950 are given with the permission of Barbara Sessions.*

In December 2019 I was contacted by Barbara Sessions of Christchurch, New Zealand. Barbara is the great niece of Esther Knowles and wondered if I would be interested in seeing a copy of a letter Esther had sent to Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in 1950. Emmeline (1867–1954) and her husband Frederick Pethick-Lawrence (1871–1961) had been leaders of the militant Women's Social & Political Union which was campaigning for votes for women.



Esther Knowles (Photograph: Barbara Sessions)

The answer to Barbara's question was, of course, a resounding 'yes'. The letter is dated 25 February 1950, two days after the British General Election. In it, Esther wrote about her response to the election results, her wish to know what Emmeline thought about it, and her longing that the two should meet to talk it over. Relying on their "long and loving association and friendship", she was confident that "you and I...understand each other wholly. You will know therefore that I feel this impulse to commune with you, in a sense of deep humility in the confident knowledge that you will not construe it into presumption".

Why, if the two were such close friends, did Esther talk of humility and presumption? Clearly, this was no ordinary friendship, and certainly not one between equals. Yet it was, as Esther says, a relationship of very long standing. It had started when Esther was only two and a half years old.

### **Esther Knowles and the Pethick-Lawrences**

Esther Knowles was born in St Pancras, London in 1895. Her father, George Knowles, was a printer, and her mother, Esther, a housewife. She had two sisters: Ellen and Lottie, Barbara Sessions's grandmother.

Esther attended a Board School in West London. Emmeline Pethick, who was a member of the London School Board, visited the school with her friend, Mary Neal, in connection with one of their social work projects. Emmeline and Mary had founded the Espérance Working Girls' Club, where one of the activities offered was folk dancing based on Mary's work collecting and reviving English folk music. They wanted to start an under-fives class, and Esther was selected to join it.

Esther attended the wedding of Emmeline Pethick and Frederick Lawrence in 1901. Five years later, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence became treasurer of the WSPU. Although men could not be members, Frederick joined the "inner circle" of the WSPU leadership with his wife, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst. He and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence founded and edited the newspaper, *Votes for Women*, and he also gave financial advice and contributions, as well as offering his legal expertise to suffragettes caught up in the legal system.



Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence

Esther was drawn into the WSPU campaign while still a schoolgirl. She played truant to go on processions to Holloway Prison to welcome women on their release from Holloway. When she was older she attended meetings where she sold copies of *Votes for Women* or was a steward. She left school, aged fourteen, in 1909, passed the examinations to enter the Civil Service and was all set for a career in the Civil Service. That all changed when one day at the Espérance Club Emmeline asked her if she would like to work for the WSPU at the Clement's Inn offices.

Esther jumped at the chance. She started off in the Editorial Department working for Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, then she moved to the General Office, and subsequently became a switchboard operator. Esther was there in April 1913 when the police raided the suffragette headquarters, which had by then moved to Lincoln's Inn. She managed to save £50 of the campaign funds from seizure by stuffing a bag of petty cash in her bloomers.



The WSPU Editorial Department, 1911

By then, though, the Pethick-Lawrences had left the WSPU after a disagreement which largely centred on the use of militant tactics in the campaign for women's suffrage. It is not clear when Esther rejoined them, but she worked on Emmeline's election campaign when she stood as a Labour candidate in Rusholme in 1918. Emmeline was unsuccessful and decided not to pursue a Parliamentary career, but in the 1918 General Election Frederick stood as a Labour candidate in Hastings.

He had already made one attempt to become an MP, at Edinburgh in 1917. The Hastings campaign also came to nothing. He had been a Conscientious Objector during the First World War, which brought criticism from Labour supporters. As a result of this, he withdrew from the campaign. A further attempt followed in South Islington in 1922, and at last in 1923 he was elected MP for West Leicester, a seat he held until 1931 when Labour lost in a landslide victory for a Conservative-led coalition government (the National Government). In the 1935 general election the National Government again won a majority, and Frederick was back in Parliament as MP for East Edinburgh.

Esther, with her experience of Emmeline's 1918 campaign, worked for Frederick during his election campaigns. In 1924 she was joined in the office by sixteen year old Gladys Groom, who worked for Emmeline, while Esther continued as Frederick's political private secretary. The job entirely absorbed her life. She worked long hours and at weekends, either in Frederick's constituencies – in Edinburgh she worked with him on a Citizens' Advice Bureau he set up – or at the Pethick-Lawrences' country home in Surrey. Frederick was a particular, precise and fussy employer, who even timed the two secretaries' work. Emmeline, by contrast, was scatty and disorganised. Both Esther and Gladys worked well beyond the expected duties of a secretary: Gladys cooked for her employers, and helped Emmeline dress and undress.

For all this, the Pethick-Lawrences were vague on the question of pay – Gladys Groom thought it was because Frederick was “on another plane”<sup>1</sup> – so much so that Esther once had to raise the issue with him. He was apologetic, and apparently they were not ungenerous, though I have an uneasy suspicion that they took advantage of their employees' devotion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian Harrison Interview, Mrs Gladys Groom-Smith.

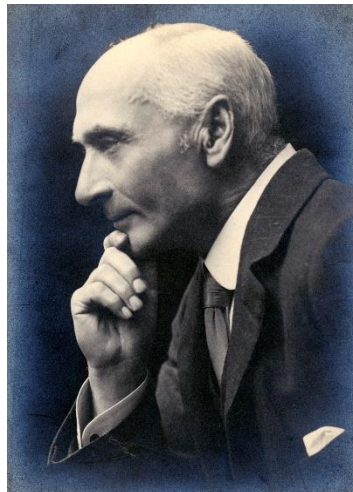
Esther was eighteen when she left home. At first she lived with her married sister Ellen, but later took a flat with her friend Olive Gosling, who worked in the civil service. In the 1920s she bought a house in Harrow, which she and Olive shared. Esther's background was working class, and although she left that life behind her and moved in very different circles, she never repudiated her roots or her family.

Apart from her family, though, Esther's life centred on the Pethick-Lawrences and her work. She and Gladys became close friends. Both loved the Pethick-Lawrences and never saw the way they were treated as unreasonable. Esther's attachment was deepened by what she had in common with them. Like Emmeline, she was deaf; and as a socialist she shared their Labour sympathies. Gladys was a Conservative, but the Pethick-Lawrences never minded.

Apparently they did mind when Esther announced to Frederick that she was going to leave the Labour Party and join the Liberals. It is this circumstance which gives a clue to much of the meaning of Esther's letter to Emmeline.

### **Esther Knowle's Letter**

In 1945, Labour won a landslide victory in the first General Election since 1935 – the war having intervened – ousting Winston Churchill's government. Under Clement Attlee, Labour went on to introduce the welfare state, the National Health Service and the nationalisation of key industries including coal mines, the Bank of England, gas and electricity. Attlee appointed Frederick, who had been re-elected as MP for East Edinburgh, Secretary of State for India and elevated him to the peerage. Frederick led a cabinet mission to India to discuss Indian independence.



Frederick Pethick-Lawrence

Frederick's removal to the House of Lords was not a change Esther welcomed. She no longer enjoyed her job as much as she had, missing the contact with people which Frederick's work as an MP had involved. Her workload became easier, however, and she spent more time with an increasingly frail Emmeline, who now spent all her time in Surrey cared for by Gladys Groom.

A life-long socialist who worked for a Labour politician, why did Esther switch to the Liberals? Her niece, Nita Needham, suggested that it was because Esther thought the Labour Party was not what it had been when she joined. Nita gave the example of a changed atmosphere at Labour Party conferences, when delegates started “getting very hoity toity”, with cabinet ministers in evening dress choosing not to dance with the “rank and file wives”.<sup>2</sup>

While changes in the social complexion of the party such as those Nita Needham describes may have contributed to Esther’s decision, remarks in her letter hint at other considerations. Her change was made at some point after Frederick’s appointment as Secretary of State for India. That would place it between 1945/6, when Labour had only just come into power, and 1950, when she wrote the letter. The letter suggests that her disillusion, if not caused by, was certainly confirmed by the results of Labour’s stint in power. The results of the Welfare State had not, in her opinion, always been happy ones:

Herding and crowding together in our towns and cities has not improved the bodies nor the minds of thousands of our citizens, and I am constrained to say that some of the spoon-feeding of our Labour Government has been a source of sad corruption of their characters, breeding a large group of work-shirkers, and an ‘everything for nothing’ crowd of spivs and thugs.

She tempered this, however, by remarking that “you have ever taught me to realise that enlightened thinking can come about only by slow and painful processes through generations of time, not minutes, even as the changes in the vast cosmic universe”. There was a strong visionary and spiritual streak to Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence’s views which had clearly influenced Esther.

The result of the General Election on 23 October 1950 was the reduction of Labour’s majority to only five seats (from one hundred and ninety three in 1945). Whether there had been a genuine swing to the right, or how far other factors such as redistricting, an increase in the number of voters, or the improved effectiveness of the Conservative campaign, had influenced the result are matters for debate, but the outcome was that Labour was not in a position to govern effectively. In her letter, Esther refers to responses in the press which were “filled with talk about ‘stalemate’ and ‘grave constitutional crisis’”. *The Times* said the electorate had “spoken with an uncertain voice”, and wondered “how long a Government with such a small majority can remain in office”.<sup>3</sup> Winston Churchill commented, “Parliament will be in a very unstable condition whatever Parliament results from this election.”<sup>4</sup> Another general election within the year was seen as inevitable.

As for the Liberal Party, only nine members were elected and they lost over three hundred deposits. Esther clearly felt the need to justify her decision to vote for them, especially given that many had thought that to vote Liberal was pointless. The indecisive election result would seem to justify the critics’ point of view. But it was, said Esther, exactly “what a great many thinking folk prayed for”:

---

<sup>2</sup> Brian Harrison Interview, Mrs Nita Needham.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 25 February 1950.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News On This Day, 24 February 1950,

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/24/newsid\\_2756000/2756707.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/24/newsid_2756000/2756707.stm)

That is why I, and many of my friends, after much travail of spirit decided to disregard all the talk about the waste of casting a Liberal vote. We knew all the pros and all the cons, and risked the bitterness, and the chagrin of utter defeat for that party, in the fervent hope that exactly what has happened, might happen.

Ester saw the political stand-off in a positive light. What others called a “stalemate” and “deadlock” was “precisely the decisive verdict which our people wanted”. It would compel the parties to “pause and take stock once again on the life and death issues which confront the world”. It would force them to “look around and outwards at the annihilating ruin which is threatening to engulf our world”.

This was not a time to worry about party politics: the world was “on the brink of being engulfed in the utter blotting out of each and every other way of life”. Much as she disliked coalitions, she thought that politicians should consider co-operating, as the parties had done in 1940. And who knows, she mused, “how such an example of co-operation may spread out and over into the international world and all over our unhappy globe.”

In a Britain where the effects of the recent war were everywhere visible – the landscape littered with bomb sites; rationing and shortages; the nation still militarised, with National Service continuing in force – Esther’s anxiety about the threats to world peace are understandable. The world had now entered the nuclear age, and Soviet Russia had caught up with America so far as weapons of mass destruction were concerned. The situation was urgent:

Until we have seen to it that there is going to be a world in which to go on living, in which to have homes and food and work, fairs [sic] shares for all, nationalisation or free enterprise or what you will, who in God’s name cares whether Labour or Tory or any other labelled party has got more seats in Parliament than the other.

Towards the end of the letter, there is a change of emphasis from the mundane – homes, food, work – to the sublime. Picking up the visionary element hinted at in her reference to Emmeline’s notion of the “vast cosmic universe”, she declared:

We want leaders, MEN who will guide the nation and our world... Leaders who are of such noble spiritual stature, with great breadth of vision, who are able to show by example and precept to the people that after all, it is not only homes and food and work and fair shares for all etc which we should strive for, but a way of life which touches both deeper and higher levels of living.

Whether such political leaders have ever been found is doubtful. The anticipated general election took place on 25 October 1951 and put the Conservatives back in power. As before, the Liberals did badly. By this time Britain was again at war, supporting their American allies in Korea in the first major war of the Cold War. World War III seemed a step closer.

In the meantime, Esther ended her passionate and at times confused “heart searching” of 25 February 1950 on a loving note:

I am asking you my dear, very dear EPL, where do we go from here? Do please try to write me a letter. All my love comes over to you. Esther.

## Picture Credits:-

Photograph of Esther Knowles provided by Barbara Sessions. This image may not be reproduced without permission.

All other images - the Women's Library on Flickr, No Known Copyright Restrictions

## Sources:-

Brittain, Vera, *Pethick-Lawrence: A Portrait* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963)

Brown, Derek, '1945-51: Labour and the creation of the welfare state', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/mar/14/past.education>

Glover, Julian, 'Formed in Haste: the 1931 Election', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/apr/04/electionspast.past6>

Harrison, Brian, Interview with Mrs Nita Needham, 31 May 1976, The Women's Library at the LSE, 8SUF/B/090

Harrison, Brian, Interview with Mrs Gladys Groom-Smith, 9 June 1976, The Women's Library at the LSE, 8SUF/B/092

Harrison, Brian, 'Lawrence, Frederick William Pethick-, Baron Pethick-Lawrence (1871–1961)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2011 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/35491>, accessed 8 Feb 2013]

Harrison, Brian 'Lawrence, Emmeline Pethick-, Lady Pethick-Lawrence (1867–1954)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37846>, accessed 23 Sept 2006]

Jenkin, Thomas P 'The British General Election of 1950', *The Western Political Quarterly*, June 1950, Vol 3, No 2, pp. 179-189

Knowles, Esther, 'Born Under a Lucky Star', *Calling All Women*, 1975, pp 6-17

Pethick-Lawrence, Emmeline, *My Part in a Changing World* (London: Gollancz, 1938)

Pethick-Lawrence, F W, *Fate Has Been Kind* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1942)

Quinault, Roland, 'Britain in 1950', *History Today*, Volume 51, Issue 4, April 2001, on line at <http://www.historytoday.com/roland-quinault/britain-1950>

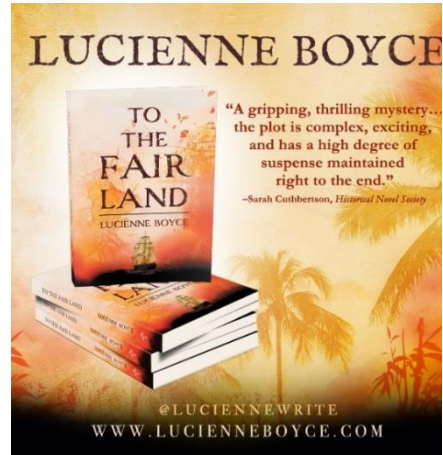
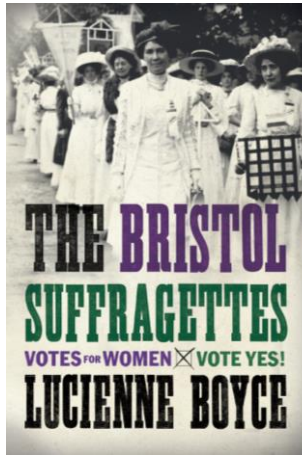
Raeburn, Antonia, *The Militant Suffragettes*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1973)

BBC News On This Day, 24 February 1950, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/24/newsid\\_2756000/2756707.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/24/newsid_2756000/2756707.stm)

BBC Politics 97: 25 October 1951,  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/background/pastelec/ge51.shtml>

© Lucienne Boyce 2021





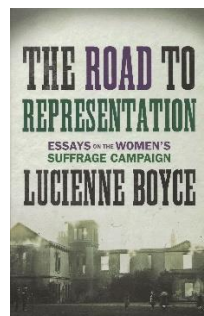
Twitter: @LucienneWrite

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lucienne.boyce>

Blog: <http://francesca-scriblerus.blogspot.co.uk/>

Newsletter: <http://www.lucienneboyce.com/newsletter/>

[www.lucienneboyce.com](http://www.lucienneboyce.com)



#### Free ebook

Sign up for my Newsletter to receive your free copy of *The Road to Representation: Essays on the Women's Suffrage Campaign*  
<https://www.lucienneboyce.com/newsletter/>