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## VIOLET VAN DER ELST'S USE OF SPECTACLE AND MILITANCY IN HER CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY IN ENGLAND

*Lizzie Seal*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Violet van der Elst launched her campaign against the death penalty in the mid-1930s. She employed direct action tactics outside prisons on execution morning, such as leading the crowd in song and breaking through police cordons. These were not only designed to engage and include the crowd that was present, but also to grab the attention of newspaper readers. Her approach to campaigning made deliberate use of spectacle and, coupled with her direct action techniques, can be understood as a form of post-suffragette militancy. This article explores the influence of the legacy of the suffragette movement on Violet van der Elst's style of penal activism.

**Keywords:** death penalty, abolition of and campaign against capital punishment, penal activism, post-suffragette militancy

### Introduction

On 2 April 1935, Leonard Brigstock was hanged at Wandsworth Prison for the murder of Chief Petty Officer Deggan aboard a ship in Chatham dockyard. The hanging itself was, of course, a private affair conducted out of public view. The outside of the prison that morning was an entirely different matter. The 'wealthy business woman'<sup>2</sup> Violet van der Elst, continued her anti-capital punishment campaign, which she had launched the previous month, with a spectacular display that was 'reminiscent of some great theatrical show'.<sup>3</sup> Vans with loud speakers drove up and down a road near the prison, playing recordings of the hymns 'Abide with Me' and 'Rock of Ages'. More than 50 men wore sandwich boards, some of which depicted a woman stood under a noose on the scaffold. Leaflets were distributed to the crowd, which requested helpers for the campaign and proclaimed 'a murderer is no different to a madman'.<sup>4</sup> Overhead, three aeroplanes trailed banners reading 'Stop the death sentence'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Execution Protest', *Western Morning News*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>3</sup> 'Execution Like Stage Show', *Hull Daily Mail*, 2 April 1935.

<sup>4</sup> 'Execution Protest', *Western Morning News*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>5</sup> 'Propaganda at Execution', *Daily Mail*, 3 April 1935.

Violet van der Elst placed herself at the centre of the spectacle. She arrived at the scene in a 'cream coloured' chauffeur driven car.<sup>6</sup> With a finely-honed sense of drama, she shouted to the crowd that 'They are hanging an innocent man'. At the strike of 9 o'clock, a woman dropped to her knees and recited the Lord's Prayer and a man cried 'England is about to commit another murder in cold blood'.<sup>7</sup> When the notice was posted, Violet asked a man to read it out. She interrupted him at the word 'executed' to provide the correction 'You mean murdered. That is what it is – legalised killing'.<sup>8</sup> She claimed that she had received letters from someone who could prove Brigstock's insanity (which would have saved him from hanging) but that the police had been unwilling to help her trace this person.<sup>9</sup>

Neither Violet's anti-authority ethos, nor her clamorous style of protest, was welcomed by the police. One of her van drivers on that day, Robert Adams, was told that it was an offence to 'use a noisy instrument for the purposes of calling persons together'.<sup>10</sup> Violet's claim that the police had refused to help her trace the letter writer was (according to the police) untrue as she had been informed by telephone that the police were, in fact, willing to assist with this.<sup>11</sup> Although she appeared to be engaging in purposeful rule-breaking and mischief-making, Home Office advice was against prosecuting Violet as 'probably that is exactly what she would welcome'.<sup>12</sup> In addition to being an irritation to the police, Violet and the protests she orchestrated were a source of fascination for the press, broadsheet and tabloid. Both *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* described the 'remarkable scenes' that had occurred outside Wandsworth on the occasion of Brigstock's execution.<sup>13</sup> Adopting a more judgmental stance, the *Daily Mail* related that an eyewitness had described the protest to their reporter as 'a most revolting spectacle'.<sup>14</sup> A leader in the *Daily Mirror* worried that 'ardent and active' protests would restore 'the loud publicity for executions that used to be a disgrace to humanity in days when Tyburn was as popular as Epsom on Derby Day'.<sup>15</sup> Reports were not confined to the British press. The *New York Times* explained to its readers that Violet was the 'wealthy widow of a Dutch shaving cream manufacturer, who herself owns three businesses' and lived at 'one of the most luxurious' homes in London.<sup>16</sup> *Time* magazine

<sup>6</sup> 'Foreign News: Crusade Against Death', *Time*, 15 April 1935.

<sup>7</sup> 'Amazing Execution Scenes', *Evening Standard*, 2 April 1935.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> TNA/MEPO3/2444, Inspector Arthur Robinson, CID report, 2 April 1935.

<sup>10</sup> TNA/MEPO3/2444, Inspector Henry Eagling, Witness statement, 2 April 1935.

<sup>11</sup> HO144/19935, Superintendent A. Askew, CID report, 2 April 1935.

<sup>12</sup> HO144/19935, M Kendall, Letter, 5 April 1935.

<sup>13</sup> 'Protest at Capital Punishment', *The Times*, 3 April 1935; 'Scenes Outside Prison', *Manchester Guardian*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>14</sup> 'Propaganda at an Execution', *Daily Mail*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>15</sup> W M, 'Back to Tyburn', *Daily Mirror*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>16</sup> 'Planes Flaunt Protest as Briton is Hanged; Rich Widow Demands Abolition of the Death Penalty', *New York Times*, 3 April 1935.

reported Violet's promise at Brigstock's execution that 'I am going to protest against every execution in England from now on... The Government dare not arrest me'.<sup>17</sup>

As Violet's attempts to trace the (possibly fictional) author of the letters that would save Brigstock suggested, she employed other tactics in her campaign in addition to direct action and the staging of spectacle. Her campaign secretary, J.L.C. Colling, wrote to the Home Secretary, John Gilmour, to explain that they had collected a petition of nearly 84, 000 signatures on behalf of Brigstock and had also held 45 anti-capital punishment meetings, the vast majority in London. This showed 'the public's distaste for this cruel and barbarous method of dealing with criminals'.<sup>18</sup> Violet attempted to deliver the petition to Gilmour personally, but was prevented from doing so. She wrote to him herself as she wanted to pay for an expert to examine Brigstock to determine his sanity. In this letter, Violet assured Gilmour that she was 'a practical woman known in commerce as a woman that has built up a huge business on my intelligence. I am not an hysterical woman. I look on facts and justice'.<sup>19</sup> Colling also wrote to the *Daily Mirror* to object to its assertion that 'crusades of this kind [the anti-capital punishment campaign] ought to be conducted through Parliament and by petition'.<sup>20</sup> He argued that the government had displayed 'apathy and lethargy' towards the issue of the death penalty, whereas Violet was 'both active and sincere'.<sup>21</sup>

The tactics that Violet van der Elst employed to protest against Leonard Brigstock's execution were typical of her approach, especially in the 1930s when her campaign was at its most vigorous. This was the decade when abolitionism gathered some speed following the (unimplemented) recommendation of the Select Committee Report on Capital Punishment 1930 to suspend the death penalty for five years.<sup>22</sup> The Labour Party advocated abolition in the late 1920s.<sup>23</sup> The Howard League had adopted it as a campaigning priority in 1923. The National Council for the Abolition of the Death Penalty (NCADP), led by Roy Calvert, was established in 1925.<sup>24</sup> These two organisations jointly launched an abolitionist journal, *The Penal Reformer*, in 1934. Their campaign emphasised sober rationality and the need for scientific support for their arguments.<sup>25</sup> They did not intervene in specific cases as

<sup>17</sup> 'Foreign News': Crusade Against Death', *Time*, 15 April 1935.

<sup>18</sup> HO144/19935, J. L. C. Colling, Letter, 29 March 1935.

<sup>19</sup> HO144/19935, Violet van der Elst, Letter, 29 March 1935.

<sup>20</sup> W M, 'Back to Tyburn', *Daily Mirror*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>21</sup> J. L. C. Colling, 'Capital Punishment', Letter to the Editor, *Daily Mirror*, 5 April 1935.

<sup>22</sup> See H Potter, *Hanging in Judgment*, (London, SCM Press, 1993), pp.130-4.

<sup>23</sup> J Rowbotham, 'Execution as Punishment in England: 1750-2000' in A Kilday and D Nash (eds.) *Histories of Crime: Britain 1600-2000*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p.186.

<sup>24</sup> G Rose, *The Struggle for Penal Reform*, (London, Stevens and Sons, 1961), pp.203-4.

<sup>25</sup> E O Tuttle, *The Crusade Against Capital Punishment in Britain*, (London, Stevens and Sons Ltd, 1961), pp.45-50.

they opposed all capital punishment on principle. Violet's active and troublesome campaigning style was virtually the polar opposite of this approach.

Elsewhere, I have examined how Violet's popular abolitionism was subversive in its attempt to mobilise spectacle to protest against twentieth-century capital punishment.<sup>26</sup> From the abolition of public execution in 1868, the death penalty in England became increasingly secret and was gradually stripped of its remaining vestiges of the ceremonial. Violet's noisy and disruptive direct action techniques, which were pursued alongside other, more conventional forms of protest, returned dramaturgy to the execution scene and encouraged public participation. In this article, I build upon this theme further by analysing Violet van der Elst's form of contentious politics as one which was influenced by, and dependent upon, the militancy of the suffragettes. If the Victorian Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment was the precursor of penal reform organisations like the Howard League and NCADP,<sup>27</sup> the Edwardian suffrage movement, itself descended from a 'long tradition of radical protest', provided inspiration for Violet van der Elst.<sup>28</sup>

Born Violet Dodge in 1882, the daughter of a coal porter, Violet as a young woman built a successful business selling face cream. Along with her first husband, who was an engineer, she also manufactured shaving cream and by the 1930s, she employed around a hundred people. When her second husband, Jean van der Elst, died in 1934 she became a spiritualist, believing that she could contact him with the assistance of mediums. She decided to launch a campaign to abolish the death penalty as this was a cause in which both she and Jean had believed.<sup>29</sup> As a self-made woman from a working class background, Violet contrasted with the patrician abolitionists of her day from the Howard League and NCADP. Her campaign was a long one and continued into the 1950s. However, Violet's use of spectacle, and her media profile, was at its peak in the 1930s and this article's discussion of her tactical repertoire largely concentrates on examples drawn from that decade. The next section assesses how far Violet van der Elst's campaign should be considered part of the legacy of feminist criminology via a discussion of recent histories of women's penal reform work. The article moves on to outline the influences on her campaign style and argues that her protests were an example of post-suffragette militancy.

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<sup>26</sup> Lizzie Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory*, (London, Routledge SOLON, forthcoming 2014), Chapter 4.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Gregory, *Victorians Against the Gallows*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> L.E.N. Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp.20-37.

## 1 Violet van der Elst and Feminist Criminology

Violet van der Elst has received insufficient scholarly attention but her campaign against the death penalty offers an important case study of political activism led by a woman. Recent historical research has highlighted the previously neglected significance of women's penal reform work in the early and mid-twentieth-century. Anne Logan points out that it is a mistake to regard feminist criminology as something which only emerged after the 1970s as women, including feminist women, were actively involved in the criminal justice system between 1920 and 1970.<sup>30</sup> They worked as magistrates, justices of the peace and social workers, wrote articles for the *Howard Journal* and were a significant force in the NCADP. Women were an important reforming influence in juvenile justice, for which some feminists argued women's maternal experience was particularly well suited, as well as in relation to prisons. Logan describes a 'feminist-criminal-justice reform network' that took a progressive stance and viewed criminal justice as an extension of feminist work.<sup>31</sup> Many of these women were members of organisations such as the Women's Freedom League, the National Council of Women, the Penal Reform League (which had been established partly in response to suffragettes' accounts of their time in prison), the Magistrates' Association and the Labour Party. This meant that women involved in criminal justice work and reform were located within overlapping 'policy networks', which enhanced their influence and effectiveness.<sup>32</sup> Daniel Grey explores the example of the Infanticide Act 1922, which created infanticide as a separate, non-capital offence from murder, as a demonstration of the policy success that these networks could achieve.

Women from the feminist-criminal-justice reform network also campaigned against capital punishment beyond the issue of infanticide. The execution of Edith Thompson in 1923 'galvanis[ed] the movement for the abolition of the death penalty and especially the involvement of feminist women within it'.<sup>33</sup> Along with Frederick Bywaters, her young lover, Edith was convicted of the murder of her husband, Percy. It appeared doubtful that Edith had any prior knowledge of Bywaters' intention to kill Percy and it seemed the 'double standard' that tolerated men's 'immorality', but not women's, was in operation.<sup>34</sup> Logan argues that feminists who supported abolition in the 1920s conceptualised it as 'like equal rights for

<sup>30</sup> A. Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice: An Historical Perspective*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p.2.

<sup>31</sup> Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice*, pp.17-23.

<sup>32</sup> D J R Grey, 'Women's Policy Networks and the Infanticide Act 1922', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21(4), (2010), 441-63, p.445; 457.

<sup>33</sup> Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice*, p.133.

<sup>34</sup> Bywaters stabbed Percy Thompson one evening when Percy and Edith were returning home from theatre. Edith was charged with murder as she had supposedly incited Bywaters in letters they exchanged whilst he was at sea.

women..., an integral part of the march of progress towards a more “civilised” state’.<sup>35</sup> The abolitionist campaign established after Edith Thompson’s execution became the NCADP, in which feminist penal reform activists, such as Margery Fry, played an important role. Feminist women involved in the campaign, particularly former suffragists, were wary of advocating special consideration for women sentenced to death as it risked mobilising the same kind of ‘chivalric’ attitudes that were used to prevent women sitting on juries or acting as magistrates in certain cases. Instead, they completely opposed the death penalty for the condemned of either gender.

This essential historical work by Logan and Grey demonstrates that, as Logan argues, ‘feminists outside the academy’ engaged in feminist criminology and penal reform well before the 1970s<sup>36</sup> However, Violet van der Elst’s popular abolitionism does not sit comfortably with analyses of organised feminist penal reform or policy networks. Her tactical repertoire was also descended from the suffrage movement but reflected its militant aspects.<sup>37</sup> As a self-made businesswoman from a working class background, she was differently positioned from the middle and upper middle class women involved in feminist networks. Violet had interests and commitments beyond her anti-death penalty campaign – she ran businesses, was a spiritualist and twice stood for Parliament<sup>38</sup> – but these were of a different nature from the feminist-criminal-justice reform network. Purposefully showy and exhibitionist, she exercised a very different political habitus from a feminist penal reformer like Margery Fry.<sup>39</sup> As the press accounts of the protest at Leonard Brigstock’s execution attested, Violet’s performative style was aimed squarely at the emotions of the crowd outside the prison and also of newspaper readers. The emergence of her campaign in 1935 was not greeted with a warm welcome by the NCADP. Roy Calvert worried that abolitionism might become ‘associated in the public mind with hysterical emotionalism’.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Logan, *Feminism and Criminal Justice*, p.135.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.167.

<sup>37</sup> Mayhall cautions against too artificially separating the militant and non-militant elements of the suffrage movement as militant tactics existed on a continuum, of which ‘women’s bodies in public space’ were at the extreme end. See Mayhall, *Militant Suffrage Movement*, p.7. This ‘extreme end’ influenced Violet’s spectacular campaigning style.

<sup>38</sup> Violet lost her deposit as Independent Conservative candidate in Putney in 1935 and also attracted few votes as Independent Labour candidate in Southwark in 1940, see C.N. Gattey, *The Incredible Mrs van der Elst*, (London, Leslie Frewin, 1972), pp.87;182; T. Luckhurst, ‘It is Thrown Against me that I have a Castle’, *Journalism Studies*, 13(1), (2012), 107-23.

<sup>39</sup> A political habitus refers to ‘a system of dispositions towards politics’, including perceptions of politics, reasons for taking part in politics and the style of engaging in politics, G.S. Harrits, ‘Political Power as Symbolic Capital and Symbolic Violence’, *Journal of Political Power*, 4(2) (2011), 237-58, p.241. Harrits’ definition is drawn from Pierre Bourdieu.

<sup>40</sup> Calvert in the abolitionist journal, *Penal Reformer*, 1(4), April 1935 quoted in Potter, *Hanging*, p.125.

Whether Violet's campaign should be regarded as a non-academic contribution to the development of feminist criminology, and whether she should be understood as a feminist herself, is uncertain. She does not appear to have explicitly claimed a feminist identity, although she was avowedly influenced by the suffragettes and, as a woman who actively campaigned for change and stood for Parliament, indebted to their legacy. In her anti-capital punishment tract, *On the Gallows*, Violet defined herself as a 'reformer' in the tradition of 'Mrs Pankhurst, Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Fry'.<sup>41</sup> Like the liberal feminist penal reformers involved in the NCADP and Howard League, she fully opposed capital punishment whether of men or women, although in relation to condemned women who were also mothers would highlight the barbarism of executing a woman with children. She also mobilised arguments about the incompatibility between the death penalty, civilisation and social progress, implicitly tethering her activism to a vision of modernity. Executions were 'harmful' to the 'highest forms of civilisation'.<sup>42</sup> Violet's analysis of the causes of violent crime combined a belief in supernatural factors such as 'evil vibrations in the atmosphere' with explanations drawn from positivist criminology that stressed 'heredity and environment'.<sup>43</sup> According to one of her propaganda leaflets, murder was the 'final product' of 'bad social conditions'.<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, though, it is not necessary to settle the question of whether Violet was a feminist and whether her campaign in itself should be viewed as a contribution to feminist criminology. There are clear reasons for historians and criminologists, feminist and non-feminist alike, to acknowledge her importance. As a woman from a different social and cultural milieu from liberal feminist penal activists, and who pursued a very different style of campaign, focusing on Violet van der Elst enables a greater understanding of precedents for varying styles of penal activism.<sup>45</sup> Although it might not be accurate to describe her as a feminist campaigner, her direct action techniques and use of dramaturgy post-dated suffragette militancy and

<sup>41</sup> Violet van der Elst, *On the Gallows*, (London: The Doge Press, 1937), p.204.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.17; 33. In this work, Violet quotes foundational nineteenth-century criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, and also recommends the work of Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo. Although she advocated hereditary causes of crime, she was not a eugenicist and opposed the idea of preventive sterilisation of criminals, (p.165). Violet's spiritualism placed her at odds with the tenor of mid twentieth-century liberal penal reform, but spiritualists were active participants in the Victorian abolition movement, Gregory, *Victorians*, p.171.

<sup>44</sup> HO144/21831. *Capital Punishment Should be Abolished*.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Topham compares Violet van der Elst and Pauline Campbell, who, following the suicide of her daughter in prison in 2003, undertook a direct action campaign outside women's prisons to highlight the issue of deaths in custody, L. Topham, *Chained to the Prison Gates: A Comparative Analysis of Two Modern Penal Reformers*, unpublished MA dissertation, Birmingham City University, 2011.



preceded women's liberation and Greenham Common, demonstrating her importance for understanding the history of British women's activism.

## 2 Violet van der Elst, Contentious Performance and Tactical Repertoires

According to Charles Tilley, people who make contentious claims on governments must draw on a limited repertoire of performances with which to make these claims.<sup>46</sup> These performances will be conditioned by the prior performances and established repertoires of previous social movements. When innovations occur in claims-making and protest, new models of performance become available. The protest tactics and techniques used to make contentious claims form the repertoire of the claimant. The tactical repertoire of a particular claimant can include a variety of ways of protesting, some of which may be improvisational. Returning to the example of Leonard Brigstock's execution, it is possible to see that Violet employed a varied tactical repertoire in opposing the death penalty. Her direct action spectacles outside prisons on execution morning generated press coverage, but she also used recognised conventional techniques, such as public meetings, propaganda leaflets, petitions and writing to the Home Secretary.

Three main influences on the spectacular elements of Violet's repertoire can be identified – the militancy of the suffragettes, advertising and previous protests against the death penalty. Singing hymns and praying outside the prison as a way of protesting against an execution was already established practice. A protest took place in Hull on the morning of George Smith's hanging in 1924, which (according to the *Western Gazette*) attracted a 10,000 strong crowd. As the bell tolled, they sang 'Abide with Me', 'Lead Kindly Light' and the song 'Where is my Boy Tonight?'.<sup>47</sup> In 1933, the same newspaper reported that a man outside Walton Jail in Liverpool was 'jeered at' as he 'knelt in silent prayer' when the bell tolled for the execution of Richard Hetherington.<sup>48</sup> These isolated examples show that Christian-inflected forms of staged mourning-as-protest against capital punishment were established performances that Violet incorporated into her repertoire. Where she was innovatory was in the organised, persistent nature of her campaign and its national focus, and in raising the level of spectacle so that her protests were more widely newsworthy.

On the morning of Henry Jacoby's execution at Pentonville in 1922, 'a well dressed man appeared carrying sandwich boards bearing the words "Humanity" and "Civilisation" crossed

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<sup>46</sup> C. Tilley, *Contentious Performances*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.11.

<sup>47</sup> 'Death Sentence Protest: Crowd Threaten to Pull Down Hull Jail', *Western Gazette*, 12 December 1924.

<sup>48</sup> 'Execution Scenes: Women Jeer at Praying Man', *Western Gazette*, 26 June 1933.

through in red ink'.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the use of sandwich boards to protest against the death penalty was not unprecedented but Violet increased the scale with her fleet of them. Hiring processions of 'sandwich men' was a constituent element of advertising campaigns that created public spectacle,<sup>50</sup> as well as being a tactic employed in protests.<sup>51</sup> The use of aeroplanes was necessarily more recent and they had been used to trail banners or 'sky write' adverts since the mid-1920s.<sup>52</sup> The planes heightened the spectacle and made a splash but were a feature of the early part of Violet's campaign, rather than an ongoing element – presumably due to cost and legal restrictions. Her plan to get Paramount to film the protest outside Wandsworth for Percy Anderson's execution on 16 April 1935 from an aeroplane was prevented.<sup>53</sup> Violet's threat, reported in the *Daily Mirror*, to sell two of her houses so that she could fly a black plane that bore her name in white letters daily over London in support of abolition did not come to fruition.<sup>54</sup> This use of commodity culture reflected Violet's experience as a businesswoman but also bore traces of the tactical repertoire of the suffragettes.<sup>55</sup> Suffragette militancy was the predominant influence on Violet's direct action tactics.<sup>56</sup> Their innovation in terms of repertoire, particularly the protest repertoire available to women, made her performances possible.

### 3 Violet van der Elst's Campaign as Post-Suffragette Militancy

The echo of the suffragette movement sounded by Violet's anti-death penalty activism was highlighted by the *Mirror* in their leader after the Leonard Brigstock demonstration. This made a somewhat equivocal appraisal of Violet's tactics. Whilst, as discussed above, it bemoaned executions being accompanied by loud publicity, it acknowledged that methods through Parliament and petition 'involve years of delay'. Strong belief required quick action and '[s]ince the days of the Suffragette movement we have learnt that more is done by

<sup>49</sup> 'Jacoby Hanged', *Western Gazette*, 9 June 1922.

<sup>50</sup> J.R. Strachan, *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 164. State lotteries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries were advertised using sandwich men, as well as torch-lit processions.

<sup>51</sup> 'Sandwich men' were employed to counter proposals for free libraries to be established in London in the 1890s. See W.E. Doubleday, 'A Year's Development of the Public Library Movement in Greater London', *The Library*, 1(1), (1892), 141-6, p.144. In 1914, the anti-war Neutrality League hired 362 sandwich men to walk through London, as well as distributing leaflets and displaying posters, H.P. von Strandmann, 'The Mood in Britain in 1914' in L. Kettenacker and T. Riotte (eds.) *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 58-76, p.69.

<sup>52</sup> J. Young, 'Woolf's Mrs Dalloway', *The Explicator*, 58(2), (2000) 99-101.

<sup>53</sup> HO144/2183, Special Branch report, 15 April 1935.

<sup>54</sup> 'Campaign in Black 'Plane', *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1935.

<sup>55</sup> Green argues that the suffragettes manipulated codes of commodity culture, using tactics derived from advertising, such as storefront displays and sandwich boards, B. Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage 1905-1938*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.3.

<sup>56</sup> Gattey, *The Incredible Mrs*, p.41.

advertisement in one year than by judicious persuasion in fifty'.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it suggested that Violet's campaign was more likely to be successful than a sober, conventional one. A story in the *Sunday Referee* reported her offer to the Home Office to employ a brain specialist to examine Percy Anderson and her intention to repeat the 'remarkable scene' that took place outside Wandsworth when Brigstock was hanged.<sup>58</sup> The paper pointed out that '[h]er methods of focusing public attention on the question of abolition are reminiscent of the tactics adopted by the suffragettes in their campaign for the franchise before the war'.<sup>59</sup>

Violet's repertoire was understood as a recognisable descendent of suffragette militancy at a time when, according to Mayhall, the suffragettes were in the process of being memorialised. The writings of former suffragettes emphasised certain forms of resistance above others, particularly violence against property, imprisonment, hunger striking and force-feeding. Although the suffrage movement had mobilised a varied repertoire that also included tactics such as presenting petitions, it was spectacular militancy that came to retrospectively define its protest style.<sup>60</sup> In 1930, a statue of Emmeline Pankhurst was erected in Victoria Tower Gardens and she became the 'embodiment of the militant movement'.<sup>61</sup> The resonances that the contemporary press identified between Violet's campaign and that of the suffragettes, and the similarities that she herself illuminated, were made in the context of this selective memorialisation in the 1930s.

Fundamentally, Violet's very active approach to her campaign fulfilled the Women Social and Political Union's motto 'Deeds not Words'.<sup>62</sup> The suffragettes had employed 'tactical creativity' to make a 'new kind of political spectacle'.<sup>63</sup> For example, on the occasion of the WSPU's Woman's Sunday rally in Hyde Park in June 1908, Flora Drummond, one of the Union's leading members, took a steam launch past the terrace of the House of Commons as members had tea and addressed them through a megaphone. The launch was bedecked with banners and flags, and also featured a band.<sup>64</sup> Attention-grabbing spectacle was also

<sup>57</sup> W M, 'Back to Tyburn', *Daily Mirror*, 3 April 1935.

<sup>58</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst's Offer to the Home Secretary', *Sunday Referee*, 14 April 1935.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Mayhall, *Militant Suffrage Movement*, pp.135-6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.137.

<sup>62</sup> June Purvis, 'Gendering the Historiography of the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Britain: Some Reflections', *Women's History Review*, 22(4) (2013), 576-90, p.577.

<sup>63</sup> I.C. Fletcher, "'A Star Chamber of the Twentieth Century": Suffragettes, Liberals, and the 1908 "Rush the Commons" Case', *Journal of British Studies*, 35(4) (1996), 504-30, p.508; L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), p.56.

<sup>64</sup> M. Unwin, 'The 1908 Pankhurst Medal: Remembering the Campaign for Votes for Women in Parliament', *Parliamentary History*, 27(3) (2008), 436-43, p.439.

Violet's *métier* and her use of bands, processions, vehicles and aeroplanes was clearly indebted to demonstrations such as these.

Lisa Tickner stresses the importance of the visual impact of banners, trophies, garlands and badges to suffrage spectacle, and of banners as 'rallying points' for marches and for commentary on them.<sup>65</sup> Violet used slogans on sandwich boards as an attempt to provide a focus for commentary. When Canadian ex-boxer, Raymond Bousquet, whose fighting name was Del Fontaine, was hanged in October 1935, Violet's sandwich men wore boards stating 'Del Fontaine is Insane'.<sup>66</sup> At 'Nurse' Dorothea Waddingham's execution at Winson Green in Birmingham in April 1936, their placards read 'Stop this terrible crime of hanging the mother of five children' and the one attached to Violet's Rolls Royce stated 'This barbaric age would hang a mother of five children'.<sup>67</sup> Visual cues and messages were a constituent part of the performance.

Like the suffragettes, Violet was an embodied part of the spectacles she created. She arrived at the prison on execution morning in her cream-coloured Rolls Royce and emerged 'dressed entirely in black' – the colour of mourning.<sup>68</sup> She retained this as her trademark attire throughout her campaign. A news report of the scene outside Pentonville for 'Cleft Chin' murderer Karl Hulten's execution in 1945 records that Violet was 'dressed completely in black, with a veil to her black hat'.<sup>69</sup> Pathé News footage briefly shows her outside Holloway on the morning Ruth Ellis was hanged in July 1955, wearing a black coat and hat.<sup>70</sup> When staging demonstrations, she drew attention to herself through being elevated, addressing the crowd through a loud-hailer and making bold statements. She would also cause disruption by repeatedly honking the horn of her Rolls Royce and driving through police cordons (discussed further below). Following the lead of the suffragettes, her presence as a woman in public and political space was disruptive.<sup>71</sup> It subverted 'conventions of femininity and politics'.<sup>72</sup> Wendy Parkins argues that the suffragettes constructed a new political subjectivity via the 'performance of practices associated with

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<sup>65</sup> Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, p.73.

<sup>66</sup> HO144/20041, Violet van der Elst, Letter to the Home Office, 29 October 1935.

<sup>67</sup> 'Nurse Waddingham's Execution', *Western Gazette*, 17 April 1936.

<sup>68</sup> 'Woman Opponent of Executions in Another Scene Outside Prison', *Hull Daily Mail*, 16 April 1935.

<sup>69</sup> 'Crowd of 200 Join in Hulten Execution Scenes', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 8 March 1945.

<sup>70</sup> 'Ruth Ellis Special', *British Pathe*, 1955: <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/ruth-ellis-special/query/elst> [accessed 20 November 2013].

<sup>71</sup> W. Parkins, 'Taking Liberty's, Breaking Windows: Fashion Protest and the Suffragette Public', *Continuum*, 11(3) (1997), 37-56, p.38; Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, p.4.

<sup>72</sup> Parkins, 'Taking Liberty's', p.45.

fashion'.<sup>73</sup> Dress helped women to 'establish the continuity of [their] performance as a suffragette'.<sup>74</sup> Violet's black clothes can be similarly interpreted as an important element in the continuity of her performance as an abolitionist.

The campaign that Violet waged was strongly identified with her as its progenitor and figurehead. In this sense, her political subjectivity was distinct from the suffragettes as well as the women of the feminist-criminal-justice reform network as her political activities were not imbricated in wider networks in the same way. Green argues that the feminist community gave the performances and manifestoes of the suffragettes meaning, but Violet did not have a similar community to rely upon.<sup>75</sup> This does not mean that her protests did not convey meaning but that the campaign was much more limited in scope and also in the likelihood of success. The 'narrativising' of the suffragette movement in the 1930s that made Emmeline Pankhurst its famous embodiment was closer to Violet's approach. In an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1936, Violet claimed, rather grandiloquently, 'They crucified Christ, they stabbed Lincoln [sic], they put Mrs Pankhurst in prison, and I suppose they will martyrize me'.<sup>76</sup>

As part of publicising her anti-capital punishment campaign, Violet also publicised herself as a celebrity figure. In the 1930s when she was a millionairess, consumption was a key element of this.<sup>77</sup> A profile in *Everybody's Weekly* explained that she was 'very rich' and the owner of two businesses. In her grand home there were 'jewelled idols, old masters, huge tapestries, gilded halls and thick carpets'.<sup>78</sup> A feature about her 'remarkable life' in the *Picture Post* was accompanied by photographs of her home, Grantham Castle, with its Chippendale furniture and chandeliers. Also depicted was Violet, posed in front of her portrait, and a close-up of her jewelled hands.<sup>79</sup> Parkins argues that 'practices of consumption, display and performance' adopted by the suffragettes exceeded the boundaries of rational, disembodied discourse.<sup>80</sup> Consumption was part of their agency as modern women and as protesting women. Violet incorporated her riches and ability to consume into her political habitus, along with her celebrity. Especially by the 1930s, consumption was symbolically associated with modern womanhood. As a rich, successful

<sup>73</sup> W. Parkins, "'The Epidemic of Purple White and Green': Fashion and the Suffragette Movement in Britain 1908-14" in W. Parkins (ed.) *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 97-124, p.101.

<sup>74</sup> Parkins, 'The Epidemic', p.102.

<sup>75</sup> Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, p.181.

<sup>76</sup> See 'Foreign News: Sweet Violet', *Time*, 25 May 1936.

<sup>77</sup> Or was at least wealthy. Violet herself claimed to be a millionairess.

<sup>78</sup> D. Bardens, 'England's Amazing Millionairess', *Everybody's Weekly*, 10 April 1935.

<sup>79</sup> Violet van der Elst, 'My Struggle', *Picture Post*, 2 September 1939.

<sup>80</sup> Parkins, 'Taking Liberty's', p.39.

businesswoman, Violet was a very modern figure and could deploy 'the resources of modernity' as part of her repertoire.<sup>81</sup> She claimed a form of citizenship that was in keeping with shifts towards the greater inclusion of women in public life and which followed in the wake of the suffragettes, who had helped to reconstitute the public, political sphere.

Violet van der Elst's great contribution to abolitionism was to make it into something newsworthy and which appeared in the press. As Potter argues, she was far more successful at raising the media profile of the anti-capital punishment position in the 1930s than the National Council for the Abolition of the Death Penalty.<sup>82</sup> Inspiring the publication of news stories was clearly her intention. Newspapers were forewarned of her planned spectacles and could report them in advance. The suffragettes had generated media coverage with their gendered, urban spectacles, which satisfied a 'desire for esthetic display on a mass scale' that was well-suited to the modernising city and the developing *mores* of the twentieth-century press.<sup>83</sup> Violet's use of the press was part of the modernity of her repertoire. Three decades after the suffragettes had transmitted their political symbolism to a wider audience through the media,<sup>84</sup> Violet developed a campaign that appealed to the expanded national popular press of the 1930s. The drama of her demonstrations and her appearances in the magistrates courts were newsworthy. Her status as a self-made modern businesswoman *and* a flamboyant 'eccentric' meant that she appealed to the democratic sensibilities of the era and was an apt subject for the expanded space given to human interest stories and features in the interwar press.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to tactics that employed advertising and street theatre, Violet was also willing to break the law. As discussed, in the early days her campaign drew attention from the police because of its public disorder aspects, such as playing noisy music in the streets and using a vehicle wholly for the purposes of advertising.<sup>86</sup> She was fined for honking the horn of her

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<sup>81</sup> Parkins, 'The Epidemic', p.115.

<sup>82</sup> Potter, 'Hanging', p.125.

<sup>83</sup> K.E. Kelly, 'Seeing Through Spectacles: The Woman Suffrage Movement and London Newspapers, 1906-13', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 11(3) (2004), 327-53, p.330.

<sup>84</sup> Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*, p.59.

<sup>85</sup> A. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004). Newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Herald* and *Daily Express* included more space for human interest stories, features and photographs by the 1930s, (Ibid, pp.35-44). Greater attention was given to women, especially 'pioneering' women, as newspaper readerships became more female (Ibid, p.50).

<sup>86</sup> MEPO3/2444, Inspector Henry Eagling, Witness statement, 2 April 1935; MEPO3/2444, Metropolitan Police Process Report, 20 March 1935. In the beginning, the campaign was also monitored by Special Branch in case it was linked to communism. A report from 1935 explained that Violet's petitions did not contain the names of any 'known communists' and these stopped, HO144/21831, Report, 26 June 1935.

Rolls Royce and causing an obstruction.<sup>87</sup> However, Violet's disobedience went further than this. One of her preferred methods of ensuring a court appearance was to intimidate (and sometimes injure) the police by driving her car at them. In April 1935, she was charged with assaulting a police officer in the execution of his duty, driving a motor car recklessly and driving without due care and attention after she drove straight at a policeman outside Wandsworth Prison, who was forced to jump out of the way, but not before being struck on his right hip and leg.<sup>88</sup> She brushed off the suggestion that he had been injured, claiming 'I am too good a driver. I did not hit you. Show me your injuries'.<sup>89</sup>

Other instances of vehicular intimidation occurred at Pentonville in October 1935, when a policeman's hand was hurt.<sup>90</sup> She also used these tactics in 1936 at the executions of Buck Ruxton and Charlotte Bryant, for which she was fined £3 and £5 respectively.<sup>91</sup> Confronting the police and the sometimes hostile execution crowd required bravery. Violet was heavily bruised as a result of being forcibly removed by a police officer from the driving seat of her car outside Strangeways at the execution of Ruxton. He had killed both his wife and their children's nanny and had dismembered the bodies, and feeling amongst the crowd ran high. Violet was shouted and jeered at by the crowd, and the window of her car was broken.<sup>92</sup> When she appeared at the Manchester Stipendiary Court, she argued that she did not 'wilfully' breach the peace, but did so 'as part of my propaganda'.<sup>93</sup>

Ten years after she began her campaign, Violet was still willing to break through a police cordon. On the occasion of Karl Hulten's execution at Pentonville in March 1945, she boarded a lorry and, along with the driver, headed towards the prison gates as the 'crowd scampered to get out of its path'.<sup>94</sup> She and the driver were both subsequently cleared of grievous bodily harm of a police sergeant by striking him with a lorry.<sup>95</sup> She was also still willing to be manhandled by the police, as at the scene of Neville Heath's execution at Pentonville Prison in 1946, when a Mass Observation investigator recorded that Violet was forcibly dragged into her own car by a police officer.<sup>96</sup> Katherine Cockin notes that the

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<sup>87</sup> 'Summonses Against Mrs van der Elst', *Evening Standard*, 8 January 1936.

<sup>88</sup> MEPO3/2444, Process Report, Earlsfield Station, 16 April 1935.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Although denying that this incident took place, Violet offered to pay compensation to the policeman in question, see HO144/21831, Violet van der Elst, Letter to the Secretary at Scotland Yard, 26 April 1935.

<sup>90</sup> MEPO3/2444, PC L. Jolley, Metropolitan police telegram, 30 October 1935.

<sup>91</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst Fined', *The Times*, 21 May 1936; 'Mrs van der Elst Objects to "Insult"', *Daily Express*, 16 July 1936.

<sup>92</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst Arrested', *The Times*, 13 May 1936.

<sup>93</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst in Court', *Evening News*, 20 May 1936.

<sup>94</sup> 'Crowd of 200 Join in Hulten Execution Scenes', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 8 March 1945.

<sup>95</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst Cleared', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>96</sup> MOATC72, 'Heath's Execution', LB, Capital Punishment Survey, 1938-56, 15 October 1946.

suffragettes staged protests at barriers and thresholds, such as railings, and in doing so challenged the public/private distinction that such places represented.<sup>97</sup> They also chose significant spaces such as law courts and the Houses of Parliament. Violet's execution scene protests were similarly made at the threshold of a public/private divide – between public participation outside the prison and private, state controlled hanging within. Breaking through police cordons symbolically disrupted the secret, civilised twentieth-century execution process and challenged its removed, private spatiality. As I have argued elsewhere, Violet can herself be understood as a liminal figure, who crossed boundaries of class, social status and gender.<sup>98</sup> This was mirrored in protest actions that troubled the physical and symbolic threshold of the prison.

Violet's spectacular campaigning tactics were not simply entertaining theatre for the crowd and newspaper readers, but also involved direct confrontation with the law. Like the suffragettes, her law-breaking became 'a self-conscious performance', which positioned her as a political agent.<sup>99</sup> Techniques of disruptiveness exceeded understandings of conventional femininity, enhancing the visibility of Violet's campaign. Clad in black and addressing the crowd through a loud hailer, she already embodied a spectacular presence and this was heightened by her aggressive interactions with the police and her willingness to shout back at unsympathetic crowds. Mayhall argues that suffrage militancy was guided by the ideal of the citizen in action, which derived from the late Victorian and Edwardian belief that 'active, engaged citizenship in the public sphere – with force if necessary – would improve political life for all'.<sup>100</sup> The written law could be flouted if it conflicted with a higher morality. A similar ideal infused Violet's anti-capital punishment campaign. Her most serious infraction and greatest act of civil disobedience was her attempt in 1943 to make public the medical records of prisoners executed at Wandsworth. Violet acquired these after the prison was bombed and gave them to a photographer so that copies could be made and published.<sup>101</sup> He alerted the police and Violet was summoned for unlawfully receiving medical reports.<sup>102</sup> She agreed to keep the contents, which detailed how long the heart of the condemned beat after hanging and their attitude to the death sentence, secret and was fined £10 and ordered to pay £10 costs.<sup>103</sup> This particular act was especially challenging as

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<sup>97</sup> K. Cockin, 'Queen Caroline's Pains and Penalties: Silence and Speech in the Dramatic Art of British Women's Suffrage', *Law and Literature*, 24(1) (2012), 40-58, p.48.

<sup>98</sup> L. Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience, Justice, Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming 2014) ch.4.

<sup>99</sup> Cockin, p.43.

<sup>100</sup> Mayhall, *The Militant*, p.11, p.143.

<sup>101</sup> Gattey, *The Incredible*, pp.41-2.

<sup>102</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst: Secrets Act Charge', *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1943.

<sup>103</sup> 'Mrs van der Elst had Prison Secrets of Death Cell', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 26 March 1943.



the removal of the suffering body from view that characterised twentieth-century execution was central to its supposedly civilised and modern operation. The threatened release of information that would pull back this veil struck at these tenets.

## **Conclusion**

The spectacular elements of Violet van der Elst's varied tactical repertoire strongly bore the influence of suffragette militancy. She embraced the use of spectacle in a way that was both anathema to liberal penal reformers and welcoming to the urban crowd (whether or not the crowd welcomed her). Rather than deploring the public's 'desire to see' punishment,<sup>104</sup> Violet recognised the possibility that it could be exploited to the advantage of her campaign. The enjoyment of punishment as entertainment by a mass audience – primarily through reading newspapers – meant that there was at least the potential to communicate an anti-death penalty message via the same means. Green argues that, alongside the adoption of street activism, 'modernist anxiety about the crowd' as the embodiment of mass culture could be discerned in the suffragette movement.<sup>105</sup> Violet displayed no such qualms and her greater equanimity about crowds and spectacle no doubt derived from her positioning as a businesswoman originally from a working class background – she could identify herself as part of mass culture, rather than as above or beyond it.

The noisy exuberance of Violet van der Elst's anti-capital punishment campaign and her militant tactics inevitably alienated those in authority, arguably restricting the amount of influence that she could have. Over the years, Violet's wealth diminished, especially because she spent large amounts of money on bringing law suits against various people. In addition to her campaigning activities, she also appeared in the newspapers because of these other notorieties. The lack of a broader base of support to give sustained meaning to her actions was limiting and probably more so than her militancy. However, her tactics deserve recognition for their radicalism in challenging the secrecy of twentieth-century execution and for throwing light on the anxious place that the death penalty occupied in modern British society. By protesting at the executions of both the condemned that attracted sympathy and those who caused revulsion, she exposed some of the cultural fault lines that existed in relation to capital punishment.

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<sup>104</sup> See M. Fiddler, 'A "System of Light Before Being a Figure of Stone": The Phantasmagoric Prison', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 7(1) (2011), 83-97, p.84 for a discussion of the 'desire to see' punishment enacted in modernity.

<sup>105</sup> Green, *Spectacular Confessions*, p.24.

Violet's campaign foreshadowed (and was part of) the increasingly contentious and emotional place that the death penalty occupied in British culture by the 1950s – a place which meant its retention or abolition was much more than simply an question of penal reform.<sup>106</sup> In the summer of 1955, following the execution of Ruth Ellis, Victor Gollancz launched the National Campaign for the Abolition of Capital Punishment. Both this group and Parliamentary abolitionism were the more prominent foes of the death penalty at this time. The NCACP did not embrace Violet as it disapproved of her 'exhibitionism'.<sup>107</sup> However, in the 1950s, abolitionists such as Gollancz and Arthur Koestler acknowledged that a campaign against the death penalty needed to engage public emotions, which paralleled Violet's understanding if not her tactics.<sup>108</sup> Violet van der Elst's health had declined significantly by the 1960s but she lived to see the Murder (Abolition of the Death Penalty) Act passed in 1965. She died in a nursing home in Kent in 1966.

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<sup>106</sup> Seal, *Capital Punishment in Twentieth-Century Britain: Audience*, ch.4.

<sup>107</sup> N. Twitchell, *The Politics of the Rope*, (Bury St Edmunds, Arena, 2012), p. 61

<sup>108</sup> M. Scammell, *Koestler: The Indispensable Intellectual*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp.444-5.