



Figure 1. 'The Suffragette That Knew Jiu-jitsu: The Arrest', by Arthur Wallis Mills, *Punch*, 6 July 1910, 9. Public Domain

Ju-Jitsu's Role in the Fight for Women's Suffrage

Ju-jitsu became a weapon in the struggle for women's empowerment, spreading 'like wildfire' across the British Empire to Australia's suffragette campaign.

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By the beginning of World War I, the burgeoning movement for women's suffrage in Britain was facing a crisis of repression. Women protesting the British government's refusal to grant women the vote were being routinely imprisoned and sent to mental hospitals, where they faced frequent beatings and assault from those who felt threatened by changes to the established political order.

Many of the women went on hunger strikes to protest their status as criminals, arguing instead that they were political prisoners. The leader of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Emmeline Pankhurst, was arrested and underwent hunger strikes eight times between 1913 and 1914.

Their actions were dismissed as hysteria, and the women were vigorously suppressed by the British government and police. Some of them were subjugated by brutal force feeding, a procedure that was both degrading and had appalling consequences for the women's health.¹

Four of the wardresses then held me firmly down on my back on the bed, by my head, arms, and legs. The doctor then took a very thick rubber tube, and began to force it down my right nostril into my throat, which was sore and parched with the hunger and thirst strike ... The acute agony, the inevitable retching and choking, and the feeling of suffocation, accompanied by the utter helplessness, all combined to make this the most unutterably hideous experience.²

» David Waldron and Zeb Leonard, 'Ju-Jitsu and the Fight for Women's Suffrage,' *Agora* 56:1 (2021), 3-8 «

The outcome of this procedure was described as:

'... two great gobs of blood in the thin drawn face moving restlessly from side to side.' Suffragette Bertha Ryland was forcibly fed nine times despite a notice from her medical advisor that she suffered from kidney disease and was not fit to endure such a procedure. The result was chronic inflammation and pain of her diseased kidney that limited her mobility.³

In response to public outrage over this practice, the *Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Health) Act 1913*—commonly known as 'The Cat and Mouse Act'—permitted the release of ailing suffragette prisoners whose health was in danger, but allowed for their re-arrest once their health began to improve.⁴ The end result of this Act was a dangerous cycle of arrest, abuse and re-arrest that was severely detrimental to the suffragette's health.

In response to this cycle of abuse and violent oppression, the WSPU organised the training of a select group of women to serve as bodyguards. Their role was to protect women facing assault and arrest while campaigning for suffrage, and to protect the 'mice' when they were out of custody.

One of Britain's first female ju-jitsu instructors was Edith Garrud. A committed suffragette, she trained thirty women of the WSPU in ju-jitsu. Sylvia Pankhurst, the daughter of Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst, strongly encouraged women to learn ju-jitsu and other Asian martial arts to defend themselves during altercations with police and violent counter protesters.⁵ It was not long before their mettle was tested during an attempted re-arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst in 1914.

As I finished the word 'injustice,' a steward uttered a warning shout, there was a tramp of heavy feet, and a large body of police burst into the hall, and rushed up to the platform, drawing their truncheons as they ran ... The bodyguard and members of the audience vigorously repelled the attack, wielding clubs, batons, poles, planks, or anything they could seize, while the police laid about right and left with their batons ... Men and

women were seen on all sides with blood streaming down their faces ... Several revolver shots rang out, and the woman who was firing the revolver—which I should explain was loaded with blank cartridges only—was able to terrorise and keep at bay a whole body of police.⁶

The success of the 'suffrajitsu', as they came to be popularly known, led to an enormous popularity of the art, and it became closely tied to women's empowerment and political activism. While Edith Garrud was extremely anxious not to have her art represented as a vehicle for assaulting police officers, her training was soon associated as a focal point of militancy.⁷ At one point, the art was labelled 'the New Terror of the Police', and tabloid papers soon featured dramatic images of suffragettes engaged in conflict with the police (Fig. 1).⁸

Garrud was ambivalent about this association. While thrilled with the popularity of her art and the high regard with which it was viewed within the WSPU, she was careful not to stand directly against the police. As she commented after a demonstration bout:

We are not going to teach suffragettes how to look after themselves in order that they might make a regular practice of scrimmaging with the police ... I only hope there will be never any need for me to be really cross with any policeman, because most of them are very decent fellows. But in this world there are a lot of very unpleasant young men who would be all the better for an occasional dressing down from a woman. It won't be long before quite a number of suffragettes will be so trained that at a moment's notice, they will be able to clear a hall of any ill-behaved persons.⁹

That being said, she was willing to engage in a photo-shoot featuring her training against her husband, who was dressed in a police uniform, to demonstrate how a suffragette might defend herself against wrongful arrest and assault (Fig. 2). She also engaged in two high-profile bouts against police officers, one of whom was also a ju-jitsu practitioner. This was reported in great

- 1 Ashley Kennedy-MacDougall, Marilyn Morgan, Olivia Weisser and Roberta Wollons, 'In Freedom's Cause: An Exploration of Suffragette and Chartist Militancy in Britain,' ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2016.
- 2 *The Suffragette*, 10 July 1914, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
- 3 Sandra Stanley Holton, 'In Sorrowful Wrath: Suffrage Militancy and the Romantic Feminism of Emmeline Pankhurst,' in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 7.
- 4 Laura Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 102.
- 5 Kennedy-MacDougall, Morgan, Weisser and Wollons, 'In Freedom's Cause'.
- 6 Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story* (London: Hirsch International Library, 1914), 341–342.
- 7 Mike Callan, Conor Heffernan and Amanda Spenn, 'Women's Jujitsu and Judo in the Early Twentieth-Century: The Cases of Phoebe Roberts, Edith Garrud, and Sarah Mayer,' *International Journal of the History of Sport* 35:6 (2018): 530–553.
- 8 'Ju-Jitsu as a Husband-Tamer: A Suffragette Play with a Moral', *Health and Strength*, 8 April 1911, 339.
- 9 'Jiu-jitsu Test,' *The World's News*, August 6, 1910, 5. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article128262145>.



Figure 2. 'Mrs. Garrud, the well-known suffragette and practiser of jiu-jitsu, shows how an ultra-militant suffragette skilled in the art of Japanese wrestling might dispose of a policeman did she so wish. Mrs. Garrud met two policemen on the mat. She is 4ft. 10in., and the first constable tackled weighed nearly thirteen stone—yet he was thrown in less than 10 seconds. The second policeman won his bout. Suffragettes who learn jiu-jitsu do not do so with any idea of scrimmaging with the police, but they feel that it is good that they should know how to protect themselves, and, if necessary, throw "unpleasant young men" out of their meetings.'

The Australasian, 20 August 1910, 35. Retrieved December 7, 2020, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article142930559>

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detail, and gives significant insight into her training strategies and methods.

Then the struggle commenced. As a huge mastiff would bend down upon an insolent kitten, the man swooped on the woman. First he tried for a catch-as-catch-can body hold, but the suffragette

eluded his grasp. Their hands met, and the giant tried to pull her to him, but that was the very last thing she intended to allow. Pulling away from him, she ran lightly back-wards, with the policeman pressing heavily after her. Desperately he exerted all his strength striving to push the woman off her balance and



Figure 3. ‘Learning the Art of Ju-jitsu—Many girls are attending physical culture classes in Melbourne and Sydney, to be taught ju-jitsu methods. This photograph shows a class in progress.’

The Herald (Melbourne), 23 June, 1931, 20. Retrieved December 7, 2020, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242946500>

‘Her little arms strained, and as he pulled against himself the man lost his balance, swirled over her head, turned a somersault in mid-air, and fell heavily on the back of his head. In less than ten seconds the suffragette had thrown the policeman.’

on to the mat. Then, suddenly, the thing happened. In a flash the woman fell flat on her back, with the massive policeman towering above her. Up shot one of her feet to meet his diaphragm. Her little arms strained, and as he pulled against himself the man lost his balance, swirled over her head, turned a somersault in mid-air, and fell heavily on the back of his head. In less than ten seconds the suffragette had thrown the policeman. Five minutes later, when he once more condescended to stand upright, the puzzled policeman again carefully regarded Mrs. Garrud. Contemplatively he scratched his head. ‘If that had happened on the pavement instead of these mats the police force would be one man short at this moment,’ he said. ‘That fall would have cracked my skull.’

For a full minute they played for an opening. At first the man tried for a catch-as-catch-can hold; but the woman was too wary. Just as the policeman’s arms seemed to have locked about her she would slip away, and clutching his wrists, attempt to pull him after her as she ran backwards to gain the impetus for the stomach fall which had proved the first man’s downfall. Dropping his catch-as-catch-can tactics the constable tried to effect two jiu-jitsu wrist holds, but both she easily countered. Twice she was lifted off her feet, but, active as a cat, she quickly regained her balance. So for five minutes the struggle went on. Strength, cunning, and skill on the one side; pluck and consummate skill on the other. At last the man’s superior strength and great advantage in weight commenced to tell.

Desperately she tried for a side-hold, and then the end came. Just failing to effect the grip the woman was at the man’s mercy. High in the air he swung her, and then down upon the mat she went. But even as she fell she made for a wrist-hold, missing it by an inch. Two taps on the floor as a signal that she was defeated and the woman rose smilingly for another bout.¹⁰

The fascination with ju-jitsu and other martial arts as a powerful weapon in the struggle for women’s empowerment did not come out of a vacuum, nor was the fascination with Japanese martial arts an accident. In the 1890s Japan had emerged thunderously on the world stage as a major industrialised power. The rapid success of Japanese industrialisation and the victories in the first Sino-Japanese war—later astounding the world with their victory against the Russians in 1905—led to a fascination with all things Japanese, especially Japan’s military heritage. Likewise, the growing Anglo-Japanese alliance in the Pacific played a significant part in ameliorating fear of the ‘yellow peril’, at least in terms of Japanese cultural engagement. As people in Japan wrestled with the transformation of Japan into a modern nation, works idealising Japan’s samurai tradition became popularised.

The mythologising of the samurai tradition spread like wildfire across the British Empire. Newspapers were filled with articles about the unique qualities of ju-jitsu, and the skills of Japanese martial artists were elevated to almost mystical proportions. Primary to this perspective was the belief that skills in ju-jitsu, judo and karate could allow the martial arts practitioner to defeat larger and more powerful opponents, a notion Japanese masters in Britain, Australia and the United States were all too keen to promote. As Master Uyenishi, Edith Garrud’s ju-jitsu instructor, commented:

Balance and quickness will always win, and women are always quick. When a great storm sweeps through the forest the heavy and sturdy trees suffer most. The smaller plants possessing plenty of elasticity can withstand the

storm because they offer the least resistance to the opposing force. It is so with ju-jitsu. It is the only system in the world which could enable an ordinary woman to defeat a strong man.¹¹

The comment also illustrates the reason why Japanese masters were so enthusiastic in enlisting female students to promote their art (Fig. 3). The fundamental principles of ju-jitsu were tied to the notion of the superficially weaker but more pliable and skilled martial artist being able to defeat a heavier and stronger opponent, and this was, in a sense, symbolically represented in the struggle of women against the exclusively male-dominated political system. This key theme, a central component to the training and philosophy of ju-jitsu, gives some insight as to the way in which it complimented female emancipation and helped make the art so popular in Edwardian Britain, Australia and the United States. As Melbourne's *The Sun* newspaper trumpeted:

The day is at hand when the snatcher of purses will no longer choose as his victim the gentle typist crossing vacant allotments in the dark of the evening. Any attempt at that kind will be met by a cunning grip from the damsel, and a heavy fall for the Ruffian, for Ju Jitsu is being learned by women.¹²

The popularity of ju-jitsu as a vehicle for women's liberation from patriarchal oppression became a focal point for women's domestic empowerment. Ju-jitsu offered freedom from domestic violence through the use of force, as illustrated in 'The Husband Tamer' and other lurid depictions in the newspapers (Fig. 4). Newspapers and popular works even advocated self-defence tips for the abused housewife at home, as illustrated in the following example with accompanying images (Fig. 5).

The fair athlete can keep a man jammed tightly on the floor by the simple process of placing her foot on his leg above the knee, and bending the toe to the proper angle. Refractory husbands should be placed for a few days in charge of Mabel Hamilton. Abused wives and mistresses please note, and see for yourselves.¹³



Figure 4. 'Down and out: Mabel Hamilton, a champion at ju-jitsu, experimenting on a victim.'

The Truth (Perth), 2 January 1915, 5. Retrieved December 7, 2020, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article209402956>.

Famed Australian practitioner Sadie Goldman, who engaged in theatrical demonstrations of ju-jitsu and took male challengers from audiences in displays of wrestling and hand-to-hand combat skills, noted this experience as a worldwide phenomenon. She trained for several years with her instructor Fukushima (Shima), initially as a way of addressing a hereditary weakness in her ankles, but was later invited to travel and train with Shima across Australia and Aotearoa, performing demonstrations and running classes for women (Fig. 6). She noted, even in her classes and demonstrations to Maori communities in Aotearoa, that many women were overjoyed to see the physical mastery of men, as a threat, by women trained in hand-to-hand combat skills. As she commented in an interview in the Sydney's *The Sun*:

Maoris really were appreciative, particularly the women. The women of all races love anything in which a man is downed. Whenever I brought Shima down (of course, I'm like a baby in his hands, really) they would scream with laughter and delight.¹⁴

Despite the enormous cultural and political significance of ju-jitsu as a weapon in the struggle for women's suffrage and the physical liberation of women, its popularity did not last much past the 1920s. The popularity of ju-jitsu among women as a vehicle for

10 *The World's News*, 5.

11 'The Miscellany', *Gloucestershire Echo*, 11 April 1904, 1. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000320/19040404/018/0001>.

12 *The Sun* (Sydney: 1910-1954), 15 April 1917.

13 *The Truth* (Perth, WA : 1903-1931), 2 January 1915, 3.

14 *The Sun*.



Figure 5. 'At Mrs. Edith Garrud's charming School of Ju-jitsu ... I saw a rehearsal of the new suffragette sketch, by Mr. Armstrong, in which Ju-jitsu (the real thing) plays a dominant part. The moral of the sketch is great. Liz ... having been taught Ju-jitsu by Mrs. Garrud, tames her drunken husband into subjection. "I'll learn this 'ere jucy jujubes, Liz, for I could do for you if I was sober," he says. "No," answers Liz; "you're a good husband to me then, and wouldn't want to, but when you're drunk I'll always be a match for you." "Then I'll never get drunk again," says Bill, and husband and wife embrace.'

'Ju-jitsu as a Husband-Tamer: A Suffragette Play with a Moral', *Health and Strength*, 8 April 1911, 339. Retrieved December 7, 2020 from https://ejmas.com/jnc/jncart_healthstrength_0100.htm



Figure 6. 'Sadie Goldman and her wrestling partner.'

The Sun (Sydney), 27 September 1914, 8. Retrieved December 7, 2020, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229855839>

... many women were overjoyed to see the physical mastery of men, as a threat, by women trained in hand-to-hand combat skills.

rebellion against patriarchal oppression in the Edwardian British Empire was supported by a unique set of economic, cultural and political circumstances that significantly changed by the end of World War I.

Martial arts during the war were remasculinised through their incorporation into military and police training. The popular theatrical displays that had popularised ju-jitsu and martial arts performances were increasingly replaced by the more passive and controlled experience of cinema. The success of the women's suffrage movement and the nationalist impact of war, incorporating women's large-scale engagement in the

industrial economy, reduced many of the pressures that led to women's political militancy in the pre-war period.

Many women continued to practise ju-jitsu and other martial arts, but much of its association with first-wave feminism and political radicalisation was lost in the inter-war period. Partly this was due to the success of women gaining the vote, but also because of the broader social changes wrought by World War I. However, the association would re-emerge in a new period of women's struggle and physical self-empowerment, along with a renewed fascination with martial arts, in the 1960s.¹⁵

15 Diana Looser, 'Radical Bodies and Dangerous Ladies: Martial Arts and Women's Performance, 1900-1918,' *Theatre Research International* 36:1 (2011): 3-19.