

Making Herstory

Authors Dame Jenni Murray and Kate Pankhurst speak to [Becca Challis](#) about fantastic women and where to find them

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Dame Jenni Murray is no stranger to feminism or writing. Her new book *'The History of Britain in 21 Women'* combines these in a new way, by writing Britain's history through the women whose lives and achievements have helped to shape it. Worryingly, a large proportion of these women are likely to be largely unknown to readers, and even those who are famous have faced obstacles and challenges that you might not have heard about. The book is a re-education, informing you of those lives that were missed from the history books because of a male-centric society.

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In fact, there's a recent trend in publishing feminist history: books which seek to re-educate the public by raising awareness of women who were previously invisible and silenced. These titles include Murray's upcoming release, as well as Rachel Ignotofsky's *'Women in Science'*, Anne Shen's *'Bad Girls Throughout History'*, Kate Schatz's *'Rad Women Worldwide'* and Kate Pankhurst's new children's book *'Fantastically Great Women who Changed the World'*; all of the books have been or will be published in September or October of this year.

So why is this surge in feminist history or 'Herstory' happening now? The upcoming election could see the first female President in the United States, the second female Prime Minister has taken office in the UK, Nicola Sturgeon is in power in Scotland and women like Angela Merkel are maintaining power in Europe. It is becoming more and more common to see women in positions of power, however there is still a real taboo around feminism. Emma Watson's recent UN speech was dismissed as 'whining, leftie, PC crap' by a *Sun* columnist. Women are criticised by anti-feminists for fighting for equal pay, whilst in 47 countries women are not legally protected against spousal rape. Feminism has been criticised for its name, with some arguing it should be renamed 'Equalism'.

It is a confusing time in the history of feminism. These books, though, are taking the movement back to its roots by celebrating the women who began it; those who helped to prove that women are capable and intelligent and should have equal opportunities. These are books of hope, to look back into the past and give faces and personalities to feminism, to help focus feminism now on the integral values of the movement and inspire people once again.

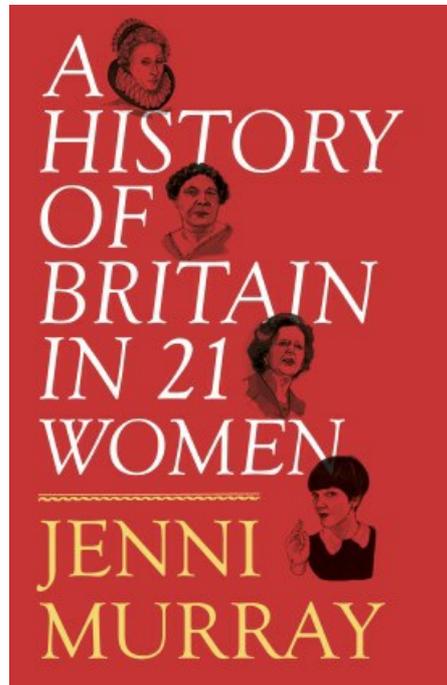


Image: Oneworld

In her book, Murray evokes the characters of these women with wit and enthusiasm, and it is clear that they are women who have made a deep impression on her. In her chapter on Elizabeth I, Murray admits that 'I became obsessed with her during my teenage years. She may have been born to her job, but her journey to the throne was long and hard.' Elizabeth I is the only Queen included in the book, which may seem strange to some considering the achievements of both Victoria and Elizabeth II. Murray's justification? "My main interest lies in the women who made their impact not because they inherited their role but because they fought prejudice and succeeded despite their background and their gender." This can be seen in her selection of women like Mary Quant, who worked her way up in the fashion industry, becoming a success through her innovative ideas such as buying clothes 'off the rack' rather than buying a pattern. Murray remarks, "my wardrobe, freedom of movement, confidence and, I guess, liberation, and that of so many of us, would be poorer even now without [her] genius." Another pioneer was the remarkable Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron, who led an incredibly interesting life and is now acknowledged to have helped pave the way for computer science: 'I like to think Ada Lovelace is the ultimate confluence of art and science, genetically programmed to be her father's and her mother's daughter - a poet and a computer buff', and it is a very special talent regardless of gender to be gifted in both sciences and humanities.

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In her writing about these women, Murray is nothing but honest. She does not expect these women to be perfect (the men certainly weren't!) and this is evident in her chapter on Mary Seacole. Seacole desperately wanted to be a nurse in the Crimea, however she was rejected by the British nurses on the basis that she was half Jamaican and half Scottish; they also did not approve of her nursing technique. This did not stop Seacole, who went to the Crimea anyway and set up her own hospital, helping hundreds of British and Russian soldiers. After her return she 'wore medals including the British Crimea Medal and the French Légion d'honneur, but there's no record of her being awarded such honours' and as Murray points out, 'it's difficult to know how much of Seacole's history can be assumed to be true, given so much of it comes from the memoir where she describes herself as wonderful'.

An example of a woman whose dedication and ambition changed history is Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. She was the first woman to qualify as a medical doctor against all odds, facing huge opposition from her male classmates - aside from Dr James Barry who had to pose as a man to be admitted to medical school.

She also cofounded the first medical school for women, as well as the New Hospital for Women in 1878 which employed an all-female staff and focused on women's health. A figure in politics as well as feminism, Garrett Anderson was the younger sister of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a leading suffragist; Elizabeth joined her sister in the fight for women's right to vote. She was the first female to hold a Mayorship as Mayor of Aldeburgh in 1908, though sadly Garrett Anderson died a year before women received the vote in 1918. "I just wish I could tell her that in 2016 sixty per cent of all medical students are female," Murray says. "They have a great deal for which to thank her."



Image: Oneworld

Murray herself could also be included in this book for her contribution to broadcasting and journalism. She has presented *Woman's Hour* since 1987 confessing that she "is the luckiest woman in broadcasting" and that she "couldn't have done it for the length of time she has without being completely passionate about it." In 1999 Murray was awarded an OBE and was made a Dame in 2011 for her services to broadcasting and the groundbreaking work of *Woman's hour* – the first programme to ever discuss homosexuality, breast cancer and prostate cancer. Murray is also patron of the Breast Cancer campaign (having survived the disease herself), a patron of the Family Planning Association and President of The Fawcett Society. She really is an inspiration, and by writing this book she is further promoting feminism: "I kept finding more and more women who needed greater exposure. We'd spoken about all of them before on *Woman's Hour* but the idea of putting them all down on paper permanently was fascinating to me."

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I asked Murray what feminism meant to her, 'It means equal responsibility. My feminist lightbulb moment happened when I was 14 years old. My mum had got a job, against her will after I'd told her that she was bored and should get one. She was mortified; she said "People will think Daddy won't be able to keep me!". Our daily routine involved me coming home from school to lay the fire and help prepare supper, only to have my father come home, sit by the fire with the newspaper, eat supper with us, say thank you and then get up and go and sit by the fire to finish it. One day I just simply asked him why he didn't help us with the clearing up or cooking. He was the loveliest man, none of it was on purpose, it just hadn't occurred to him. He said "I don't mind helping". This was not the point. I replied "It's not about helping, it's about doing your share.""

This is Murray's advice to men on becoming feminists: "Men have to change their attitude and the way they see things, to accept that you share everything: working, having a family, the washing – it's all a shared responsibility.

"They should also read my book! It's terribly important that people learn a feminist history. It's nonsense that no women's history is taught on the A Level syllabus; these women completely changed the way in which we live. We *need* to know." This is something that has been an integral part of her sons' upbringing. "They would never have left the table without clearing it, I was always making them aware of women's equality. They're better cooks than I am! They're both incredibly respectful towards women; I kept telling them that they may grow up to be doctors, vets, lawyers one day but that women will too."

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Domestic violence does occur, regardless of your class, wealth or race

When I asked Murray her opinion on the most important issues facing women today, she referred to the ongoing discussion surrounding *The Archers'* recent storyline about domestic violence, something discussed every week on *Woman's Hour*. “It highlights to the public that domestic violence does occur, regardless of your class, wealth or race,” she said. “The idea that a woman cannot be safe in her own home is such an abomination.”

Another issue that Murray highlighted was childcare. *The Sunday Times* revealed that a mother returning to work after having two children needed to earn £40,000 a year to pay her childcare bills and not be out of pocket. This leaves just £4 a day for other bills like shopping or electricity. Murray adds, ‘It’s always assumed that if a child comes into the family the woman has to stay at home and look after them. This is not how it should be; there is a real struggle to find good quality child care’.

Women’s issues often come hand in hand with those that affect children. I spoke to Kate Pankhurst about her new children’s book *‘Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World’*. When I asked her about the issues that affect women today and as a new mum she highlighted the difficulties around gender stereotypes, “which are thrown at children still in the womb!”

Pankhurst is aiming to achieve the same as Murray, but by re-educating our youngest generation and focusing on women all over the world, not just Britain: “I really hope the book offers a starting point for children and families to further discuss and explore the lives of all the great women featured in this book including Mrs Pankhurst.” With Pankhurst as a surname, immediate connections with Emmeline, the leader of the Suffragette movement, spring to mind. For this Pankhurst says, “to have any sort of connection to a family who sacrificed so much to change things in such a dramatic way for women feels extremely humbling.”



Image: Kate Pankhurst

Pankhurst’s selection process was similar to Murray’s: “I found the best way to narrow down the list was to try and include women with a range of skills so we have a scientist, a sportswoman, an artist, an adventurer and I also wanted to include a girl’s story (Anne Frank).” Kate also discovered unknown names in her research, “for instance Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the channel.” Ederle actually completed her swim two hours faster than all the men who had achieved this before her.

What does feminism mean to Pankhurst? “I haven’t felt that being a feminist is something that has to be named. It’s a way of life and an understanding that equality is our right. But that doesn’t mean I’m not a feminist. I felt like Caitlin Moran summed it up for me well quite recently: “What do you think feminism IS? Ladies? What part of ‘Liberation for Women’ is not for you? Is it the freedom to vote? The right not to be owned by the man you marry? The campaign for equal pay? ‘Vogue’ by Madonna? Jeans? Did all that good shit GET ON YOUR NERVES?!”

Pankhurst greatest inspiration is her mum. “She always made me feel I could follow my talents and do whatever I wanted to have a go at... I have asked families that question and more often than not the answer is always mothers and grandmothers.”

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These women’s achievements have helped to improve the lives of women or impacted on the world in some way, just as Murray and Pankhurst have in creating these books. The books also highlight the many obstacles facing these women. Both Mary Somerville (mathematician and astronomer) and Caroline Herschel (astronomer) were made honorary but not full members of the Royal Society, despite their huge contributions. They also both had to publish their work under a different name: Mary under her husband’s and Caroline under her brother’s. Similarly, Jane Austen had to publish her novels as ‘By a Lady’ because writing was not seen as the right profession for a woman, and her father had to publish her novels for her. The artist Gwen John was overshadowed by her brother Augustus, also an artist, during her lifetime, but he recognised her talent, writing, ‘her pictures are almost painfully charged with feeling, whilst my own are almost painfully empty of it.’ Augustus correctly predicted the turning of the tables: ‘fifty years after my death I shall be remembered as Gwen John’s brother.’

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Elizabeth I was buried with her sister Mary Tudor, which Murray remarks is “odd, when they’re known to have so disliked each other.” The explanation given to this all lies with James I, whose duty it was to bury Elizabeth. He saw her as inferior to his own mother Mary, Queen of Scots because she did not produce a legitimate heir, and her legitimacy was questioned constantly through her childhood. The peace that she brought to England and all of her accomplishments were forgotten by James, who instead focused on Elizabeth as a woman, whose role should have been to continue the line. Through this one action, James helped to rewrite history.

Similarly, the playwright Aphra Behn was received well at the time she was writing, but, as Murray explains, after her lifetime writers including Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson “criticised her for writing like a man.” This led her being almost forgotten “until the women’s movement of the 1970s began to uncover the history of women who had made their mark.”

This goes to show the importance of rediscovering a feminist history and educating younger generations with a full history: one that includes women and their achievements. Murray dedicates her book: ‘For all the young people who need to know’ and I’m so glad that now, I do.



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