Banners, Banter and Boys: Feminism and Historical Distortion in *Iron Jawed Angels*

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between the 2004 film *Iron Jawed Angels* and the historic events and figures it purports to represent. As a major film on the national women’s suffrage movement in the US, *Iron Jawed Angels* had great potential in terms of educating viewers on the lives and accomplishments of America’s suffragists. However, this paper argues that in modifying the character and story of activist Alice Paul to appeal to female, conservative, and American audiences, the movie diminishes Paul’s achievements and assumes that female spectators require the tropes of a “chick flick” to sustain their interest.

Katja von Garnier's 2004 film *Iron Jawed Angels* was hailed by many as a chance to acquaint young women with some of their overlooked feminist foremothers.[[1]](#footnote-1) It follows the younger generation of women who fought for the vote in early twentieth-century America, led by Alice Paul. Although there is much to applaud in a mainstream movie about women's history and the transfer of a story to the cinematic medium requires some artistic license, the film's portrayal of Paul's fight for a constitutional amendment is by no means fully accurate or unproblematic. The film's overriding goal seems to be to make feminism and feminists more attractive to contemporary female audiences, with the twin sub-objectives of converting women to feminism and selling the movie to female audiences. However, the changes it makes to the historical narrative also seem intended to appeal to a more conservative audience, as well as an overwhelmingly American one. In achieving these goals, the film sacrifices the portrayal of elements like the historical Paul's independence, determination, and radical feminism, and tends to condescend to its target audience. This paper will examine four of the film's major departures from historical fact, their contributions to these goals, and their implications.

One of the movie's most notable choices is its portrayal of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns as partners in the suffrage movement and best friends. They joke and tease each other, shop together, have a shared history, and show a vulnerability around each other that they do not reveal to anyone else. When one of them is flagging, only the other can restore them to their courage and purpose.[[2]](#footnote-2) The impression created is that of two girls who are both colleagues and comrades: two best friends running a revolution together, supporting each other in the bad times and enjoying themselves in the good ones.

However, there does not appear to be a historical basis for this very close and warm relationship. It is undeniable that Paul and Burns worked closely together for a long time; they met in England in 1909 as students involved in the British suffrage movement and undertook several militant missions together. They then worked in Washington from 1912-1920, running NAWSA's Congressional Committee, the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, and finally the National Woman's Party.[[3]](#footnote-3) They were important to each other organizationally and professionally;[[4]](#footnote-4) they shared the workload of running a national organization, and those who worked with them said that they seemed to share "one spirit and one brain."[[5]](#footnote-5) The two women certainly respected and admired each other; Burns “was impressed with Paul's “extraordinary mind, extraordinary courage, and remarkable executive ability,””[[6]](#footnote-6) and Paul alludes to Burns' "splendid" and "eloquent" speeches, courage, and valiancy.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nevertheless, when Paul speaks of Burns in a 1970 interview, it is always in a professional and businesslike way. Although she constantly refers to things they did together, it is with the tone of one speaking of a trusted lieutenant, not an intimate friend. And Burns' letters to Paul were always addressed to "Miss Paul," suggesting a certain formality and distance between them.[[8]](#footnote-8) Some may attribute Paul's coolness to her driven and single-minded nature, but there are colleagues from her suffrage days of whom she speaks with great warmth. She says of Elsie Hill, for example, "She was so lovely and so enthusiastic . . . there was never a day from that time until she died that we didn't work together over something. Whatever we were working on, we worked together."[[9]](#footnote-9) From watching the movie, one would guess that Paul was speaking of Burns here. But the most affectionate thing Paul says about Burns is that "we became very good friends and continued to be all our lives until she sort of melted away in the last part of our [Equal Rights Amendment] campaign."[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, the two did not stay in contact from 1920 until Burns' death in 1966, which speaks volumes about either the professional nature or the uneasy termination of their relationship.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There is a possibility that Paul and Burns were in fact best friends during their decade of working together, but that their relationship was irreparably changed by Burns' retirement from activism in 1920. Here is Paul's explanation of Burns' resignation:

Lucy Burns, she just said, "I don't want to do anything more, I don't want to be on any board or any committee or have anything more to do, because I think we have done all this for women and we have sacrificed everything we possessed for them and now let them- They say they want all these things, better salaries and better positions, and married women the right to work” . . . she said, "let them fight for it now. I am not going to fight for these married women any more." And she didn't. She never-! I don't know if she even came to our final convention. From that time on she never gave any help.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The touch of bitterness in Paul's tone is unmistakeable, and several of her comments throughout this interview indicate that she never quite forgave Burns for quitting their movement once they had achieved their first objective.[[13]](#footnote-13) Immediately after the 19th Amendment was ratified, Paul began pushing for the Equal Rights Amendment, and she continued to fight for it all her life.[[14]](#footnote-14) Someone possessing this untiring drive might not look kindly on someone who declared she was finished after ten years, and this final act of Burns' may have coloured Paul's formerly affectionate memories of her. However, in an interview many years later, Paul mentioned that Burns had “never [been] quite as committed as we’d like,” suggesting that the absolute trust and personal intimacy that the movie portrays between the women never existed. [[15]](#footnote-15)

We will never know for certain the nature of their relationship during those years, but in choosing to make Paul and Burns best friends instead of simply close colleagues, the film makes a small leap of imagination. Most of the effects of this choice support the goal of making feminism and these particular feminists appealing to today's female audiences. Portraying Paul and Burns as best friends certainly assists in this objective by humanizing Paul. It paints her as being like any other young woman, with a sense of humour and a need for female companionship. The way Burns teases Paul and does not take her too seriously invites audiences to do likewise, keeping Paul from becoming too intimidating. Compared with the iron drive she shows for much of the movie, Paul's interactions with Burns also portray her as more balanced and lighthearted, which makes her a more relatable figure and a more likable heroine. In addition, their relationship seems to make running a national organization more of an enjoyable adventure, and less lonely and draining. The two express their frustrations to each other and overcome obstacles together, mostly by mocking their opponents.[[16]](#footnote-16) This representation could encourage young women to get involved in activist work themselves by portraying it as easier and more enjoyable than it always is. Depicting a female best-friend relationship also pushes the movie closer to a "chick flick," a commonly-derided genre of romantic comedy aimed at and centered around women, their female friendships, and their heterosexual dating experiences.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Paul and Burns’ playful friendship and dynamic makes them seem younger, more casual, and more entertaining to watch, as female characters of this genre often are.

However, all of these positive effects come at a cost. Portraying Paul as invested in a close friendship with one of her lieutenants makes her appear less focused, independent, and dedicated to her political work than she really was. The offhand playfulness of their partnership makes Paul and Burns seem less serious about their work, and downplays the incredible achievement of two young women waging an effective national campaign with very minimal resources. It also risks giving girls a false idea about the nature of activist work. And in trying to humanize Paul, the film seems to be implying that today's young women would find her true single-mindedness off-putting, boring, or intimidating. The implication that girls cannot relate to strong, hardworking women unless they are appropriately girly in their relationships does not reflect much faith in the capacity of contemporary young women; nor does the film's edging towards the "chick flick" genre. The suggestion seems to be that to appeal to women, the characters must be lighthearted, fluffy, and feminine, as Paul and Burns appear to be in a scene where they argue over a pretty hat.[[18]](#footnote-18) This condescending attitude towards female viewers was noted by film critics; the movie has been compared to *Sex and the City* and called *Legally Blonde III: The Suffragette Years*.[[19]](#footnote-19) Finally, the film's implication that the historical Paul was too unappealing to be depicted truthfully reflects a rather low opinion of her. Diminishing her character's determination and drive as the film does suggests that there was something fundamentally wrong with the historical Paul, and that as she was, she was not an appropriate feminist heroine for today's girls.

The second significant change in the movie is the invention of the character Ben Weissman, a *Washington Post* illustrator and widowed father who is romantically interested in Paul. He is purely fictional, but takes on importance in multiple ways. As Keith says, "the movie presents the relationship between Weissman and Paul as a significant part of the plot in terms of the publicity Weissman could get for Paul with the newspaper."[[20]](#footnote-20) Paul's relationship with him is at first portrayed in a very strategic light; she knows he is interested in her, and she is playing him strictly for the publicity. Ultimately, Paul seems to develop feelings for Weissman, but chooses not to pursue a relationship with him. She explains her choice to Burns on the grounds that "It wouldn't be fair. To him or Michael [Weissman's son]. A little boy needs a mother."[[21]](#footnote-21)

Although Keith insists that "There are no accounts in history of Paul being involved with men romantically,"[[22]](#footnote-22) Zahniser and Fry demonstrate that Paul did in fact have an admirer named William Parker, a banker whom she met in her university days. They point out that "[t]he familiar tone of Parker’s letters to Alice is exceptional among all her correspondents."[[23]](#footnote-23) Most significantly, Parker was in Washington from 1916 to 1918 (approximately the same time frame where Weissman is inserted into the movie), and "a few letters survive to indicate that Parker and Alice stepped out on a regular basis, their relationship known to staffers at Cameron House."[[24]](#footnote-24) But there is no indication that Paul's relationship with Parker, who worked on Wall Street, contained any of the opportunism portrayed in the film's version of her relationship with Weissman.

The question here is not why the film chose to create a relationship for Paul, but why it chose to replace a real man with this fictional one. The film's attempt to appeal to women and to glamourize feminism and its adherents is evident in this choice as well. Although Paul did not need a man to get her publicity—she got plenty of her own[[25]](#footnote-25)— this addition makes her seem more relatable by illustrating that she could, in fact, need help and be helped. She is not portrayed as invincible or all-powerful, which presents her as a more human and well-rounded character. And in taking advantage of Weissman's romantic interest in her to get publicity for her cause, Paul is depicted as savvy and strategic in a sexy, feminine way. The movie returns again to conventions of the chick flick, portraying a confident, attractive young woman who is not afraid to use her sexuality to get what she wants. The film also accomplishes something else with the creation of Weissman's character; it makes Paul look selfless, almost saintly in letting Weissman go because it is best for him and his child, not because it is what she wants. Rather than appealing to feminists and women here, the film seems to be playing up to more conservative viewers who believe in the importance of the nuclear family for children and for society.

Again, these desirable effects are not achieved without some sacrifice. In rendering Paul dependent on Weissman's influence and newspaper for publicity, the film makes her look less self-reliant than she was. It also makes Paul seem more manipulative and coquettish in taking advantage of Weissman’s romantic interest in her and suggests to today's young women that capitalizing on men's desire for you is an expedient and time-honoured strategy to further your goals, instead of demonstrating the creative and effective strategies Paul actually did use to get publicity.[[26]](#footnote-26) And it implies once more that female audiences are only interested in watching chick flicks or movies that use their tropes. The conservative implications of Paul refusing a relationship with a single father are also powerful. The historical Paul did not need any additional reasons not to marry. She chose not to because she was fully dedicated to her cause, and she likely did not want to, and that was enough; those were valid reasons.[[27]](#footnote-27) Adding this child and the sacrifice Paul seems to be making for him suggests to young women viewers that those reasons would not be enough on their own, that choosing to remain single is not a reasonable option unless it is best for your partner and their family. It diminishes the primacy of Paul's own desires and her right to make decisions based on her goals and feelings, and having invited female viewers to identify with Paul, does the same to them.

Thirdly, the movie paints Paul as the original creator of many of the political strategies used in the American suffrage campaign. When she proposes a suffrage parade to Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw, for example, she is greeted with slight surprise and condescending approval ("Have your parade, Miss Paul,") as though it is a new, silly, and childish idea.[[28]](#footnote-28) When the women in the movie begin picketing the White House in January 1917, not a word is spoken about where the idea came from. But after initial shots of the women holding banners, the movie cuts to Paul telling reporters that "The National Woman's Party will station sentinels at the White House gate from dawn until dusk every day until the Constitution of the United States is amended," suggesting this is entirely her idea.[[29]](#footnote-29) And when Paul undertakes a hunger strike in prison, she explains it as a "tradition in old Ireland."[[30]](#footnote-30) When the movie mentions Paul and Burns' time in England, it only refers to the violence involved in the British suffrage movement; Shaw tells them that "we do not throw bricks," and warns them against "hooligan tactics."[[31]](#footnote-31) There is no indication that any of the strategies Paul learned as part of the British suffrage movement could be useful or would reappear in her campaign.

However, the historical Paul learned all three of these tactics directly from her time working with the Pankhursts in England. She had marched in suffrage processions in England and Scotland, and Zahniser and Fry mention that Paul "most directly modeled the White House picketing after the infamous Siege of Westminster by the British Women’s Freedom League, held during her first days of organizing with the Pankhursts."[[32]](#footnote-32) Paul had also learned about and carried out hunger strikes in prison in England, under the direction of the Women's Social and Political Union.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The choice to entirely conceal the influence of the British suffrage movement on Paul and credit her with these ideas has implications for both her character and her country. With this alteration, the film continues to further its central goal, but now with an unmistakeably patriotic spin; it wants to appeal commercially to American women, win over American women to feminism, and interest American women in American feminists, as well as inciting general national pride. This modification also paints Paul as braver, more creative, more independent, and more important than she was by suggesting that she invented all these tactics. By implying that American women were the first ever to use these strategies, the movie places American suffragists as the most significant and innovative activists in the women's movement.

By cutting out the influence of the British suffragettes, however, the film obscures America's place in an international tradition of feminist activism and portrays American women as more isolated than they were. Although this may glorify American feminists, it deprives girls of the knowledge that women's movements can learn from and support each other, and that their feminist inheritance comes from beyond their borders. By inflating Paul's historical importance, the film seems to imply that her true story and achievements were not impressive enough on their own, and by using false information to create a sense of national pride in American women, it suggests that they did not have enough to be proud of already in their feminist foremothers. This obscuring of Paul's British training also makes her look less humble and willing to learn, eliminating the traces of a time in her life when she was inexperienced and absorbing the ideas of others. If the film was looking for ways to humanize her, as it seems to have been, this would have been an excellent opportunity. But it chooses to promote national feeling instead of creating a more balanced and accurate depiction of Paul as an international suffragist.

A fourth alteration in the movie is the idea of Paul's intent in picketing the White House during World War One. The movie frames it as the women deciding they will picket *despite* the consequences, because it is within their legal rights and necessary to further their cause. Initially Mabel Vernon, Doris Stevens, and even Paul hesitate at picketing a wartime president, but Burns convinces them it is necessary if they want to succeed, pointing out that "we kicked ourselves when we dropped the cause during the Civil War and what happened? Congress gave Negro men the vote and told women to wait their turn."[[34]](#footnote-34) Their intent is only to continue the campaign that is already underway; neither arrest or imprisonment are explicitly mentioned by anyone, and when the first group of pickets is arrested and sentenced, Paul's immediate reaction is "Just get them out!"[[35]](#footnote-35)

One historian agrees with this perspective, claiming that "no one really believed that the police would move in and arrest picketers."[[36]](#footnote-36) But Zahniser claims Paul was deliberately trying to get the pickets arrested to gain publicity and public sympathy, stating "she was determined to provoke the sort of heavy-handed response that had gained the British suffragettes so much attention."[[37]](#footnote-37) She reports that "[Paul] had instructed the sentinels on dealing with interference from the start. Since the authorities failed to oblige, she provoked them."[[38]](#footnote-38) In England, Paul had undertaken militant missions on the clear understanding that they would likely lead to arrest and imprisonment. She was familiar and comfortable with the idea of activists deliberately going to jail for their cause.[[39]](#footnote-39) Regarding the "Russian banner incident," in which an angry crowd tore down the banners of two pickets, Paul wrote "We had a very exciting time today," seeming to suggest she was pleased with the violence the banners had incited.[[40]](#footnote-40) Even newspapers of the day claimed that the women were trying to get arrested for the publicity it would win them.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Here, the film's goals of appealing to women and winning the sympathy of conservative viewers seem to merge. By portraying the wartime pickets as exercising their legal rights without a thought of being arrested, the movie suggests a respect for the law in Paul and paints the arrested women as complete innocents and brave martyrs, even more than they were. Creating the impression that Paul and her pickets initially had no idea they might be imprisoned makes them more relatable to non-radical female viewers, who would never consider deliberately going to jail. And the intimation that Paul originally did not want the pickets to be arrested or imprisoned makes her seem more compliant, respectful of authority, and well-behaved, inviting approbation from conservative audiences who would disapprove of activists deliberately trying to provoke arrest.

The movie's choice here diminishes Paul's courage and determination, as well as that of the pickets. It also implies to today's young women that directly challenging the law and trying to provoke arrest are not acceptable or advisable ways of bringing about change and encourages respect for authority and the law. The suggestion that Paul at first did not want her pickets imprisoned suggests that prisons are dangerous and frightening places, further dissuading women from doing anything that might result in incarceration. These effects are somewhat mitigated, however, by the film's portrayal of the women who continue to picket after the initial arrests with the full recognition that they will be arrested and imprisoned.

These are by no means the only changes *Iron Jawed Angels* makes to the story of Alice Paul. Some of the other changes, like downplaying Paul's racism, are easily explained as making Paul a more likeable and politically correct heroine for the 21st century. [[42]](#footnote-42) Others, like eliminating characters and condensing timelines, are understandable for the sake of creating a compelling cinematic narrative in two hours. And others, such as eliminating Paul's health problems and creating the character of senator's wife-turned-suffragist Emily Leighton, simply require a longer paper to fully explore.[[43]](#footnote-43) The four major changes discussed in this paper effectively achieve the film's three overall objectives of making feminism and feminists more attractive to women, appealing to conservative viewers, and rousing American patriotism. As Keith says, "There is no doubt that this movie displays an overt historically feminist message about the women of the NWP fighting for their right to vote and for the expansion of women's roles in society."[[44]](#footnote-44) However, these goals are attained at the price of implying that the true Paul was an inadequate feminist role model, diminishing Paul and her fellow activists, and suggesting that female audiences lack the intelligence to enjoy films that do not employ "chick flick" conventions. Paul famously called the 1920 victory that won her countrywomen the vote "not a gift but a triumph;" there is yet to be a film about her that deserves the same appellation.[[45]](#footnote-45)

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