The Shrieking Practitioner of Suffragitsu: Champion of Women, or Societal Saboteur?

"It is the Japanese fine art of jujutsu or self-defence that has proved more than a match for mere brute force, and is, therefore, not only a good accomplishment, but a necessary safeguard for the woman who has to defend herself through life" ("The world we live in," 1910, as cited in Lane, 2024). This is what British suffragette Edith Garrud wrote in the *Votes for Women* newspaper in March of 1910, encouraging women to learn jiu-jitsu. Today, we know jiu-jitsu as a highly accessible martial art practiced worldwide. But just over a century ago, history-shaping women like Edith Garrud were making their debut in this grappling sport. Particularly in England, jiu-jitsu had a huge cultural impact in the early 1900s by introducing women's self-defense to the Western world, empowering female suffragettes in their physical and rhetorical battle for enfranchisement, and influencing media portrayals of women seeking the right to vote.

William Barton-Wright, an English railroad engineer, first introduced jiu-jitsu to England in 1999 (Bellingham BJJ, 2020). In 1895, Barton-Wright's position as a railroad engineer took him overseas to Japan (Bellingham BJJ, 2020; McKay, 2021). Though Barton-Wright made questionable claims about studying Kodokan Judo under Jigoro Kano, he returned to England with several legitimate Japanese martial arts practitioners, including Sadakuza Uyenishi and Yukio Tani, who taught at Barton-Wright's studio (Bellingham BJJ, 2020). Barton-Wright combined elements from judo, jiu-jitsu, British boxing, French savate, and stick fighting into a combination martial art which he named "Bartitsu," after himself. Conceptually, Bartitsu was divided into four main categories: stick, foot, fist, and close combat (Wolf, 2007). Although his personal skill in jiu-jitsu was probably overstated, Barton-Wright's article "A New Art of Self

Defense" combined with intense promotion of his studio and Bartitsu had an immense cultural impact on England by bringing martial arts into the spotlight (McKay, 2021).

At the time Barton-Wright created Bartitsu, England was undergoing a re-definition of sport, expanding it be more inclusive of the lower classes and women (Wolf, 2007). Additionally, the middle and upper classes were experiencing increased concerns about their safety as "street gangsterism" was more intensely broadcast through the newspapers, which found scary sensationalist headlines more profitable than dull political stories. Barton-Wright, along with William Garrud, seemed most interested in the self-defense aspects of martial arts, while Uyenishi and Tani, who made their living through professional athleticism, promoted martial arts as a competitive sport. Though Bartitsu was mostly a fad that died out around 1903, it supported the growth of sports culture and delivered a solution to the perceived increasing need for individual self-defense that lasted long beyond its brief rise to popularity. Perhaps most importantly, Barton-Wright left a revolutionary legacy of not only allowing women to train but also holding the first specialized women's self-defense classes in savate, Vigny stick-fighting, and jiu-jitsu.

Emily Watts, one of the first British women to learn and teach jiu-jitsu, began studying under Uyenishi in 1903 (BartitsuSociety, 2020). By 1906, she was teaching classes at the Prince's Skating Rink in Knightsbridge and published the first jiu-jitsu manual in English to detail Kodokan techniques, "The Fine Art of Jujutsu." The mingling of judo and jiu-jitsu techniques in Watt's book demonstrates how William Barton-Wright's introduction of mixed martial arts influenced the way jiu-jitsu was practiced in the Western world at this time. Watt's book focused on jiu-jitsu's ability to develop strength of body and mind, and greatly increased awareness of jiu-jitsu as a legitimate means of women's self-defense (Watts, 1906). Watts played

an influential role in bringing martial arts to women in the early 1900s; however, she was arguably not the most impactful female martial artist of her day.

Edith Garrud, who would become an extremely important figure to the women's suffrage movement in England, started training at Barton-Wright's studio in 1899 (Bellingham BJJ, 2020). Garrud and her husband William learned jiu-jitsu from Sadakuzu Uyenishi, eventually taking over his studio in Golden Square, London, when he returned to Japan in 1908 (O'Hagan, 2021). Garrud started teaching self-defense classes for women and children and even opened her own studio in 1909 (London on the Ground, 2025). The Garruds staged public martial arts demonstrations together, in which William played the role of a police officer being defeated by Edith, who used the techniques of jiu-jitsu to make up for the disadvantage of being under five feet tall.

Between 1888 and the close of the 19th century, English women had received the right to vote in local council elections but not at a national level, leading some suffragists to believe that a more hands-on approach was needed to secure voting rights (Trista, 2018). This led to the foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), an exclusively women's organization run by activist Emmeline Pankhurst. Pankhurst led the WSPU to take more aggressive action in their suffrage campaigns, which led to increasingly violent police backlash and the injury and imprisonment of many suffragists.

As rallying women suffered assault and even death at the hands of police and male vigilantes, Edith Garrud's popular jiu-jitsu classes and demonstrations caught the eye of Emmeline Pankhurst, and Garrud was asked to join the WSPU (O'Hagan, 2021). In 1909, Garrud started teaching classes solely to suffragists twice weekly, emphasizing the ability of jiu-jitsu to allow a smaller opponent to defeat a larger opponent: "A woman who knows ju-jutsu,

even though she may not be physically strong, even though she may not have even an umbrella or parasol, is not helpless....They have brought great burly cowards nearly twice their size to their feet and made them howl for mercy" (Trista, 2018).

Cartoons from this era support the circulating idea that jiu-jitsu enabled women to fight against and beat men, although this ability was not always considered positive. One popular 1910 cartoon from Punch, an influential British magazine, depicts Edith Garrud herself as "The Suffragette That Knew Jiu-Jitsu," having just beaten up and flung over a fence several policemen while others look on cowering in fear. While this cartoon's original meaning may have been to illustrate Garrud as undesirably masculine, it also has the effect of making jiu-jitsu look effective and attractive to women wanting to become strong or fight for their right to vote.

In 1913, the British government established the "Cat and Mouse Act," which allowed suffragists on hunger strike to be released for recovery and then rearrested. To combat rearrests, Pankhurst and Garrud created the Bodyguard, a group of women trained in jiu-jitsu whose job it was to defend the WSPU speakers from arrest. One newspaper article from 1910 titled "Suffragettes and Jiu Jitsu" includes a report on how Garrud expelled an interloping man from a women's franchise meeting. Garrud is quoted saying, "after we have had our new society in full swing for some months we hope to have a regular band of Jiu jitsu officers, who will be able to deal with all the male rowdies who dare bother us" ("Suffragettes and Jiu Jitsu," 1910). The article labels anti-suffrage men as "annoying" and emphasizes the "peaceful" nature of the suffragettes. The writer spins a heroic tale of small, defenseless women equipping themselves to guard against large police officers and interfering men who make themselves a nuisance to the cause. The bold and inspiring tone taken by Garrud and the article's writer demonstrates support

for the women's suffrage movement and suffragette jiu-jitsu, which was important positive coverage for the suffragettes in a time when they received much negative press.

Many people responded negatively to women bringing martial arts into their battle for the ballot. One journal coined the derogatory term "jiu-jitsuffragettes", implying that learning jiu-jitsu would encourage suffragists to attack policemen, although this attempt at disparaging the suffragists backfired when Garrud proudly adopted the title and "suffragitsu" was born (London on the Ground, 2025). While the suffragettes were a more radical, militant wing of the women's suffrage movement in England, oppositionists overemphasized their violent nature to sully their cause. One cartoon created by Punch Magazine depicts two suffragettes casually conversing about whose house they will be burning next, suggesting them to be unruly dangers to society ("The fifth of November", 1913). Another Punch cartoon shows the British home secretary Reginald McKenna, who introduced the "Cat and Mouse Act", dangling a furious scruffy creature named "militancy" in front of the Greek god of healing and asking what the cure might be ("Aesculapius in London", 1913; Mitchell, n.d.). This cartoon renders the beliefs and actions of suffragettes as an annoyance to be fixed.

Despite the expanding definition of sport, women who stepped outside the box by using jiu-jitsu to demand the vote were portrayed as mannish, ugly, or sabotaging their own cause. Between 1905 and 1914, it grew popular and even fashionable for the English upper-class to participate in the sport form of jiu-jitsu, but using it in combat against the police was viewed in a much more negative light (Wolf, 2007). "The Shrieking Sister" cartoon from 1906 indicts suffragettes for giving the suffrage movement a bad reputation through their aggressive and wild tactics. Another cartoon refers to the hunger strikes undertaken by imprisoned suffragists, showing an ugly and "mannish" woman dressed in a suit and sitting in front of a room full of

food, steeling herself for planned future hunger strikes (“Pastimes of the great”, 1913). In 1985, Punch published a comic titled “The New Woman” by George Maurier that depicted two women in dress shirts and ties smoking, as a man leaves the room proclaiming he must go seek the society of women. Such cartoons demonstrate the common fear of anti-suffragists that giving women the vote would result in a loss of essential femininity. While athletic opportunities for women were increasing, these portrayals of the suffragettes show there was still a line women were expected not to cross in how they used martial arts.

Despite backlash from conservative political leaders and media during England’s women's suffrage movement, being competent in jiu-jitsu allowed women to protect themselves and feel more confident while campaigning for their rights, serving an essential role in both self-defense and personal empowerment. Jiu-jitsu helped enable suffragettes to disprove the ideas that political or athletic involvement would ruin femininity and that women’s weakness should disqualify them from voting. The “gentle art” served as a unique steppingstone for women’s rights by encouraging England’s expanding definitions of sport and politics.

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