

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After 40 years' fruitless campaigning for the vote, the suffragettes turned to direct action. Public buildings and the homes and workplaces of their opponents were targeted. Politicians were barracked at public meetings and, occasionally, attacked with eggs or cayenne pepper, but the serious violence was directed at property, not people.

The Scottish suffragette movement included servant women and working class wives whose families could not afford to lose a carer or breadwinner to prison. The dramatic acts of destruction tended to be carried out by more affluent women who did not have the same worries.

the Cat and Mouse Act

When jailed, many suffragettes went on hunger and thirst strike. In 1913, the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-health) Act, also known as the Cat and Mouse Act, was passed. Under this law, female prisoners who starved themselves were released from jail on licence to return once they were well enough to serve the rest of their sentences. Many women freed under the act went on the run instead.

The Liberal government did not want a suffragette dying in prison and becoming a martyr to the cause, but nor did they want the "mice" slipping through their fingers. There was widespread resistance to force feeding among Scottish prison doctors. Luckily for the government, Dr Hugh Ferguson Watson was an ambitious man of independent mind. In February 1914 he was sent to Calton Prison, in Edinburgh, where he force fed the suffragette Ethel Moorhead.

the Perth four

In the summer of 1914 Dr Ferguson Watson became the medical officer at Perth Prison, and force fed four other women:

Frances (Fanny) Gordon, convicted of trying to burn down a mansion house in Rutherglen
Maude Edwards, convicted of attacking the King's portrait with a hatchet at an Edinburgh art gallery
Frances (Fan) Parker, charged with attempting to blow up Rabbie Burns' cottage in Alloway, and
Arabella Scott, convicted of setting fire to a racecourse stand at Kelso.

Their "treatment"

Dr Ferguson Watson kept these women in isolation, from the rest of the jail and from each other, and denied them visits, books, newspapers and the opportunity to write or receive letters. Any activity that might interfere with the digestion was forbidden. Force feeding was a dangerous procedure. Of the four women held in Perth, only Arabella Scott had the physique and constitution to survive it over a lengthy period. Frances Gordon's nasal passages were unusually narrow, so she couldn't breathe with the tube in her throat. Fanny Parker, too, responded badly. Dr Ferguson Watson's "solution" to this problem was to feed them through the rectum. When this was reported in the newspapers, it recruited many new sympathisers to the suffragette cause.

Perth Prison under siege

Large numbers of suffragettes poured into Perth while their four comrades were imprisoned there. They rented a tenement flat opposite the prison and shouted encouragement through a megaphone. There was a constant picket at the prison gates, and hymn singing through the night. Rallies in the town drew crowds of three thousand people, who then marched to the jail. Church services and cinema performances were disrupted to draw attention to Arabella Scott's plight. During a visit by the King and Queen a suffragette broke through the crowds and struck the window of the royal car. Initially the townsfolk were hostile. Suffragettes had burned down the pavilion of Perth's cherished cricket club the previous year. But the tide of local opinion turned as people learned what was happening inside the jail.

Dr Hugh Ferguson Watson and Arabella Scott

Arabella Scott was held for more than five weeks. Dr Ferguson Watson force-fed her morning and evening, clad in an overall, but returned in between wearing his ordinary clothes. On these visits he sent the female warder out of earshot and held long and wide-ranging conversations with his prisoner. We know this from an impassioned letter he wrote after her release, and we know a little of what they talked about from tape recordings of Arabella reminiscing about her time in prison. *[held in a private collection in Australia]* Further details can be found in the doctor's written reports to the prison governor. The play uses this information, but remains a fictional exploration of their relationship.

a qualified victory

The suffragettes put Perth Prison under extreme pressure. Female warders were strained and irritable, staff were working extra hours, and relief warders had to be brought in from other prisons at great expense. Nationally, there was controversy about Dr Ferguson Watson's use of rectal feeding. MPs raised the matter in the House of Commons. Then it emerged that Fanny Parker, jailed under the name of Janet Arthur, was in fact the niece of the British hero Lord Kitchener. Force feeding had proved a public relations disaster for the government. In late July 1914, the chairman of the Scottish Prison Commission offered Arabella Scott a deal: her freedom in exchange for renouncing the suffragette cause. She refused, but they released her anyway.

Within a month Scotland was at war, and the fight for women's votes was suspended. The government extended an amnesty to suffragette law-breakers, and many redirected their energies to the war effort. A limited form of female suffrage was introduced in 1918. All women were given the vote in 1928.

[Back to Historical Background](#)