

Wendy Cooper, Annie Kenney and her *Memories of a Militant* - "Simply an account of events that are engraved on my heart"

Synopsis of Paper delivered at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network Autumn Study Day, Saturday 15 November 2014

"Writing women's lives: Historians and Autobiography"

This paper presented ideas which challenge the prevalent characterization of the suffragette Annie Kenney, in which her main value is in what she represented as a working-class woman, having worked in an Oldham cotton mill up to the age of 26, when she met Christabel Pankhurst.

Annie Kenney wrote her autobiography *Memories of a Militant* after the WSPU dissolved in 1917, being published in 1924. In her words, it was not 'a record of dates and names but simply an account of events that are engraved on my heart.' As a personal account it lacks the robustness of good history, which may obscure recognition of the book as a valid account of her time working at the heart of the WSPU.

Annie's writing style is earnest and emotional but lacks the vivid descriptive powers of Sylvia Pankhurst's writing, which Sylvia was able to employ to great effect in her 1931 book, *The Suffragette Movement - An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*. Sylvia's version of events is strongly evident in later representations of the fight for the vote. The film maker Jill Craigie was inspired by Sylvia's book but her attempts to make a film about the suffragettes in the 1940s never came to fruition, partly through Annie's stubborn refusal to co-operate. The BBC produced a radio play in 1951 and letters written during the last few years of Annie's life (she died in 1953) betray her anxiety as to how she would be remembered. In a letter to Christabel she wrote that the BBC had presented her as a '*ridiculous caricature of the real Annie Kenney. She made me appear as an ignorant uncouth factory girl.Such in the Lancashire dialect no one dead or alive ever heard me speak in that way. I may have been naive in the ways of the world but I had keen perception.*'

Being of northern working-class origin, Annie's background was different to many of the people she worked alongside in the WSPU. However, commonplace assumptions about this background do not reflect the complexity of the reality of Annie. To achieve a more nuanced understanding it is necessary to place her autobiography in a wider context by using the widest possible range of sources, which include family papers, audio recordings and diaries, as well as accounts written contemporaneously and later. Specific examples of useful materials include Annie's brother Rowland Kenney's autobiography, the suffragette Hannah Mitchell's autobiography and the diaries of the WSPU supporter Mary Blathway.

Archives

Blathway Diaries, Gloucestershire Archives, Gloucester

Brian Harrison Interviews, Women's Library, London School of Economics, London

Annie Kenney Papers, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Kenney Family Private Papers, James Kenney, London

Brief Bibliography

Kenney, Annie, *Memories of a Militant* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924)

Kenney, Rowland, *Westering* (London: J.M. Dent, 19