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SUFFRAGETTE PHOTOGRAPHS

By Dr June Hannam,

As a small provincial city Bath is not the sort of place that historians would expect to find militant suffrage activity. And yet the city had a thriving branch of the militant group, the Women's Social and Political Union. Among its members were Mary Blathwayt and her mother Emily who lived at Eagle House in nearby Batheaston. Nearly all of the leading activists from the WSPU stayed at some point in Eagle House where they could rest after exhausting speaking tours or recuperate from their experiences of prison and forcible feeding. When they visited the house suffragettes were encouraged to plant a tree in 'Annie's Arboretum', also known as the 'suffragette', field where their photographs were taken by Mary's father, Colonel Linley Blathwayt, who was also a supporter of the movement. The three photographs reproduced here are from Colonel Linley's extensive collection. Although we know about the suffragette field and the tree planting from documentary sources, the photographs can provide an added dimension to our understanding of the militant movement

Edwardian suffragettes were among the first protest groups to make extensive use of visual propaganda. Tickner has argued that the imagery of the movement should be seen not just as an 'illustration of the "real" political history going on elsewhere', but as an integral part of the conflict 'with its own power to shape thoughts, focus debates and stimulate action'. Women artists produced drawings and cartoons for posters, postcards, banners and newspapers, but photographs also had a key part to play in drawing attention to the cause. Who can forget the striking image of Mrs Pankhurst being lifted off the ground by a policeman as she was arrested during a demonstration outside the House of Commons. Images such as these ensured that, while women for years were 'hidden from history', this could not be said of the suffragettes who retained their place in the history books and in popular memory.



Colonel Linley's photographs provide us with less familiar images. In the first picture Annie Kenney watches Teresa Garnett plant a tree. Annie Kenney, a former mill worker, was an organiser for the WSPU in the West Country and was a key figure for the Blathwayt family. They found her to be a charismatic personality and Mary lived with her for several months in Bristol to help with organising work. Annie was a frequent visitor to Eagle

House, where she had her own room, and the suffragette field was named after her. Teresa Garnett was very active from 1909, when in that year she attacked Winston Churchill with a riding whip in Bristol and went to prison for disturbing the peace. The photograph is clearly staged so that the viewer gains the impression that women who had a tree named after them actually visited the field and took an active part in the planting. The photograph also gives a sense of the size of the field, which is extensive, and provides a glimpse of the summer house in which suffragettes were able to rest. The other two photographs show Annie Kenney and Elsie Howey, one of

the women who hid behind the organ in the Colston Hall and disrupted the cabinet minister, Augustine Birrell's speech. They are standing by their trees, which are clearly marked with a metal plaque, recording the species of tree, the date of planting and the names of the women associated with the trees.



The clothing worn in the photographs provides points of interest for the historian. In many publicity shots Annie Kenney is dressed in typical mill workers' clothes, such as shawl, apron and clogs, in order to emphasise that the movement attracted women from all social classes. In the photographs reproduced here the style of her dress and the material used is plain in comparison to the other women, but there is no attempt to differentiate her from the others. Indeed all of the women are wearing clothes which are relatively simple and unostentatious. This may have been a way to draw attention to the similarities between them, regardless of their class, and also to indicate their seriousness of purpose. At the same time they are depicted as 'feminine', in soft blouses and with their hair pinned up in the latest fashion. Annie Kenney in particular is photographed in a

conventional female pose as she gazes wistfully at her tree, holding the top branch as gently as possible. The suffragettes were anxious to use imagery to counter the stereotypes put forward by their opponents that they were 'unwomanly', 'mannish' or a 'shrieking sisterhood'. As part of their own definition of womanliness, however, they emphasised women's ability to take militant political action and most of their photographs depict women engaged in direct propaganda in a public space, such as demonstrations or selling their newspapers. The photographs reproduced here are unusual in showing suffragettes in a more domestic space, in peaceful and contemplative mood. They provide a reminder that suffrage campaigners also had another life in which they socialised and stayed for weekends with friends. Suffrage work took over much of their lives, but not all of them. They were in fact 'ordinary' women engaged in extraordinary events.

Suffragettes were aware of being members of a collective group, working together for a common cause. On the other hand the willingness of individuals to take risks and to display courage was vital for the success of the WSPU. The photographs draw attention to both these sides of the movement. The women wear the purple, white and green colours of the WSPU on their brooches, while the trees and plaques symbolise both their collective and their individual struggle. In the pictures of Annie Kenney and Elsie Howey the trees are much taller than those which have been recently planted which suggests that the movement was also growing stronger and spreading. The photographs also celebrate the achievements of individuals, in particular those

who are less well known, such as Teresa Garnett and Elsie Howey. To get a real sense of the large number of different women involved, however, it is essential to look at the whole series of photographs taken by Colonel Linley which provide a unique record of the rank and file.



It is impossible to know whether Colonel Blathwayt ever intended that his photographs should be published. Unlike photographs placed in the press or sold as postcards, these were not used for direct propaganda purposes. On the other hand the fact that they were taken suggests that even in the thick of the fight contemporaries were aware of the historical significance of what they were doing and wished to ensure that the individual women who took part should not be forgotten. It is ironic that Colonel Linley sought to record the planting of trees which he must have assumed would be a long-lasting reminder of the actions of individual suffragettes. Instead, in the 1960s the trees were cleared to make way for a housing estate and it is the photographs which have remained to provide historians with a reminder of the varied women who took part in the struggle for their rights.

FURTHER READING

For more on the Blathwayt family, see B.M. Willmott Dobbie, *A Nest of Suffragettes in Somerset* (Bathaston Society, 1979) and J. Hannam, "'Suffragettes are Splendid for any Work': The Blathwayt Diaries as a Source for Suffrage History", in C. Eustance, J. Ryan and L. Ugolini eds., *A Suffrage Reader* (Leicester University Press, 2000). For a discussion of suffrage imagery, see L. Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14* (Chatto & Windus, 1987) and D. Atkinson, 'Six Suffragette Photographs', in M. Joannou and J. Purvis eds., *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester University Press, 1989)

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