

Mary E. Gawthorpe: An Introduction

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This piece refers to the microfilm collection which is now included in the digital archive *Women's Studies Archive: Voice and Vision*.

The papers of Mary Eleanor Gawthorpe comprise an extensive collection of personal and political material from a woman whose political involvement spanned many decades and went beyond supportive activism. Gawthorpe worked full time for several feminist and socialist organisations in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in both Great Britain and the United States of America. This rich collection will be of great interest to anyone wishing to research the British militant suffrage movement--in particular, the campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the group founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester in October, 1903. Gawthorpe went to work for the WSPU in the autumn of 1906 as a paid organizer, for a salary of about £2 (\$4) a week. Her position as a working-class socialist from northern Britain (she had previously worked for the Women's Labour League) expands our knowledge of the social, cultural, and geographical basis of the WSPU's work. The collection also contains valuable material that illuminates the tasks carried out by the campaign's paid workers, thus broadening our understanding of militancy. As illustrated by Gawthorpe's involvement with a variety of organizations in the United States, much of the later material in the collection helps situate suffrage involvement as part of a broader political life. In addition to charting Gawthorpe's activism, these holdings reveal the contexts in which the history of the suffragette movement came to be written, as well as some of the political and personal motives behind standard autobiographical accounts,

including Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* and Gawthorpe's own less readily available memoir, *Uphill to Holloway*.

A large part of the collection is concerned with Gawthorpe's work as a paid organizer for the WSPU. In 1907, she was given a place on the WSPU's new National Committee, formed by Emmeline Pankhurst after members of the Women's Freedom League (WFL) split off from the WSPU. Gawthorpe was ill with appendicitis at this time, so her papers do not engage with the issues of the split in any great detail, nor is there much information about how the National Committee functioned. However, the collection is particularly rich in its detail of the regional dimensions of the WSPU's campaign. In 1908, Gawthorpe was appointed as the WSPU's organizer in Lancashire. From her base in Manchester, she ran the campaigns of the "mother union," as the branch in that city was known, as well as overseeing the work of other organizers in the county. Handbills, posters, and invitation cards offer the researcher evidence of the extent of the militant suffrage campaign outside London; for example, such ephemera indicate the numbers of women volunteers required for a single successful suffrage meeting. Although Gawthorpe was based in Lancashire, as one of the WSPU's most sought-after speakers, she carried out engagements all over the country. Consequently, alongside details of provincial campaigns, the collection emphasizes aspects of the WSPU's metropolitan campaign outside of its headquarters. Items such as the annual reports of the Kensington (London) branch of the WSPU alert researchers to the fact that branches in close physical proximity to the union's headquarters retained a degree of autonomy in political and financial affairs.

Gawthorpe's position as a regional (and sometimes itinerant) suffrage organizer brought her into contact with many suffragettes throughout Britain. The ensuing correspondence with them, which is preserved in this collection, draws attention to the pace of the movement and some of the demands that the militant campaign placed on its workers and volunteers. Much of this detail will be found within the bundles of postcards to or from Gawthorpe, written at the height of the WSPU's activity. As the addresses on the numerous cards show, suffragettes who were deployed away from home were expected to take cheap lodgings. There was little access to telephones, but the early twentieth-century postal service offered multiple daily deliveries; the postcard section reveals how political campaigns could be arranged via this medium. The communications outline the planning of demonstrations, as well as more complex suffragette plans. The campaign-related material within the postcards is enhanced elsewhere in the collection with hastily scrawled notes on the back of handbills and sketch plans for demonstrations, such as the diagram of how the human "horses" were to line up to draw the carriage of Liverpool suffragette Patricia Woodlock on her release from Holloway Prison in June 1909. Unsurprisingly, given the punishing pace of work evidenced by these communications, there is also some useful correspondence detailing Gawthorpe's symptoms and treatment during her final health breakdown, which prompted her withdrawal from the WSPU in 1911.

The collection offers a deal of material helpful to scholars with an interest in Gawthorpe's association

with *The Freewoman*, the radical feminist periodical founded by Dora Marsden in September 1911. Les Garner's 1990 biography of Marsden, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit*, has already offered an interpretation of this difficult period in Gawthorpe's life. The correspondence found here between Gawthorpe and her mother expands on this, revealing the extent of Gawthorpe's physical incapacity at the time, as well as offering some suggestions as to what she anticipated her role in *The Freewoman* was to be. Although Gawthorpe ended her formal connection with the WSPU in September 1911, the collection demonstrates her continuing interest in the suffrage question and her ongoing involvement in certain aspects of campaigning, thus expanding the historical understanding of how suffrage could function for an individual beyond the confines of a specific organisation. Of particular note here are the papers that cover Gawthorpe's independent petition against the lengthy sentences passed on her former organizing colleagues, Mary Leigh and Gladys Evans, in September 1912, which drew her into correspondence with George Bernard Shaw and Havelock Ellis, amongst others. There is also extensive material relating to Gawthorpe's unsuccessful attempt to end the British state's increasingly brutal treatment of suffragette prisoners by means of initiating a mass hunger strike of sympathetic women throughout Britain over the Christmas period of 1912. As Gawthorpe was no longer a member of an organisation at this stage, she followed the press coverage of her initiative by subscribing to a clippings service. The ensuing file shows how newspapers throughout Britain reported this new departure for the suffrage campaign with varying degrees of seriousness.

For suffrage historians and for researchers with an interest in the political cultures of feminism, the extent to which the collection allows the key friendship networks of activists to be traced and recreated is a particularly useful dimension. Mary Gawthorpe was especially friendly with Dora Marsden, the Manchester suffragette she helped to “bring on” as a worker and who went on to organize in Southport, and with Rose Larmatine Yates of the Wimbledon WSPU. In addition to these fairly well-known relationships, the collection explores Gawthorpe’s friendships with suffragettes whose involvement remained wholly at the level of particular branches. Some of the practical dimensions of such relationships are illustrated by the papers relating to the testimonial fund set up for Gawthorpe by concerned friends after her departure from *The Freewoman*. While this material will have resonance for anyone investigating political friendships, the fact that most of these relationships involve women from Manchester will be especially intriguing to those with a similar geographical interest.

Much of the later material in the collection reveals that some of the friendship networks begun at the height of the WSPU’s activity lasted a lifetime. Correspondence with Edith Rigby and Ada, Hilda, and Jessie Russell continues into the 1950s. Gawthorpe kept up some of her later contact with former WSPU colleagues through the Suffragette Fellowship, an organisation established in the 1920s as a means of keeping former activists in contact. A key feature of the work of the Fellowship was shaping a narrative of suffragette history from the militant perspective. Gawthorpe’s papers reveal in detail how her part in this undertaking was largely shaped by her contact with Sylvia

Pankhurst over Pankhurst’s own heavily autobiographical history, *The Suffragette Movement*, carried out between 1929 and 1931. Researchers seeking to learn more about how the history of the militant campaign was formed will find much to engage their interest here, as will those investigating autobiographical approaches to history. The correspondence that began as a rekindled friendship between Gawthorpe and Pankhurst touches in detail on Pankhurst’s feelings at becoming an unmarried mother, and her relationship with her son, as well as Gawthorpe’s responses. This sheds light on later Victorian feminist perspectives on sexuality, both retrospectively and in the somewhat more permissive climate that followed the First World War. Gawthorpe’s attempts to market the book reveal the levels of interest still provoked by the WSPU in the 1930s. Political historians will note her correspondence during this period with key figures from the British socialist movement of the 1890s, including Shaw and Alfred Orage. The acrimonious end to her renewed friendship with Sylvia Pankhurst prompted Gawthorpe to engage with the Suffragette Fellowship herself. Correspondence with Elsa Gye describes changes in the Fellowship rules that enabled both Gawthorpe and her husband, John Sanders, to become involved. At this point, Gawthorpe began to gather material for her own autobiography; correspondence with Grace Jardine and other former associates offers information on what became of several key figures in the northwest suffrage branches.

Whilst Mary Gawthorpe is best known as a suffragette, the collection offers evidence of her extensive involvement in a number of political campaigns in the

United States, including the New York State Woman Suffrage Society, the National Consumer's League, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union of America, and the Farmer-Labor Party. There is much of value in the collection for researchers with an interest in these organisations. Documentation of Gawthorpe's occasional contact with key figures in American feminism - such as Alice Paul (whom she would have known from her time in the WSPU) and Harriot Stanton Blatch- is useful in furthering our understanding of the transatlantic connections between feminists in the decades before and after the First World War.

There is valuable material in the collection for anyone seeking to understand the complex ways in which social class and political activity were connected at the end of the nineteenth century. Whilst Gawthorpe's origins were indisputably working class, her prominence as a political organizer has made it difficult to categorise her. The opportunities offered by the pupil-teacher system in nineteenth-century Britain were central to Gawthorpe's success. This system paid exceptionally bright working-class pupils to stay on at their schools, where they were put in charge of classes. They studied in the evenings and at weekends at the local pupil-teacher centre. Gawthorpe's notebooks, which form part of the collection, are a rich resource for anyone interested in the history of teacher training or education in this period. Notes from her own studies are contained here, as well as the teaching materials she prepared for her work in a variety of Leeds schools. While showing what was required of a pupil teacher, the collection evidences Gawthorpe's ongoing commitment to education through her work at Kensington College, where she

underwent secretarial training in 1916. Many working-class activists of Gawthorpe's generation found that the combination of education and political involvement enabled them to transcend the limits delineated by their social class. Gawthorpe's papers illuminate in detail the route which made this possible.

This microfilm edition of the Papers of Mary E. Gawthorpe, 1881--1973 now makes her remarkable life widely accessible. The collection will be of use to researchers at a variety of levels. For undergraduate projects concerned with working-class education, women's suffrage, female political cultures, and the construction of first-wave feminist histories, Gawthorpe's autobiography--offered here with the useful index compiled by her nieces in 2001 - is made available, alongside the extensive personal correspondence between Gawthorpe and a variety of political figures, some prominent and others who are less well known. For more detailed research projects, these can be supplemented by the extensive compilations of press clippings amassed by Gawthorpe, which chart a variety of reactions to aspects of the suffragette campaign. The printed materials, including handbills and flyers for meetings and annual reports of local suffrage societies, add a further dimension, particularly for those with an interest in the suffrage movement. The extensive coverage of Gawthorpe's attempts to continue public suffrage work outside of any organisational body will engage political theorists and feminist theorists alike.

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