Annie Kenney and the Politics of Class in the Women’s Social and Political Union

Abstract
This article argues that an analysis of Annie Kenney’s public representation and private relationships offers a new way of evaluating how class was understood, experienced, and negotiated within the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). Annie Kenney was a well-known suffrage activist from Lancashire, usually described as the only working-class woman to achieve prominence in the organization. This article analyses how the WSPU initially made much of Annie Kenney’s social origins, attracting significant press attention. However, it also demonstrates that their assumption that she could effectively speak for all working-class women was problematic, since it assumed a homogeneity of working-class experience. As the WSPU shifted its focus to recruiting more middle-class women, it sought instead to celebrate Annie Kenney’s commitment to the cause. Ironically, she was often more effective in building relationships with wealthier women, forming substitute families that provided significant support and benefits. Yet though the depth of these relationships was extraordinary in the context of contemporary class relations, they remained exceptional rather than typical. This article thus develops the work of scholars including Sandra Stanley Holton, Sue Thomas, and Laura Schwartz, who have analysed how class fragmented and shaped the women’s movement. It demonstrates that the significance of class within the WSPU was fluid and shifting rather than fixed and static and indicates both the potential for, and barriers to, meaningful and lasting cross-class collaboration.

‘If you have any class feeling you must leave that behind when you come into this movement’, asserted the first edition of Votes for Women, the newspaper of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), since
‘the women who are in our ranks know no barriers of class
distinction’.¹ Both leaders and members of the WSPU consistently
claimed they were part of a ‘classless’ organization, since by working
together for the benefit of their sex, women were transcending the
divisions of class. From different ends of the social spectrum, the
wealthy Grace Roe could argue that ‘there was no such thing as class
with me, I never had a feeling about class’, while seamstress Hannah
Mitchell initially felt ‘a unity of purpose in the suffrage movement
which made social distinction seem of little importance’.² Such
optimistic pronouncements held out an idealistic prospect of women
collaborating, regardless of education, background, and experience, in
a movement based on mutual respect and regard and a shared
understanding of female experience.

Yet historians have often been sceptical of the degree to which these
assertions reflected the organization’s real policies or attitudes. The
extent to which women were able to coalesce around a shared gender
identity in the women’s movement which emerged from the mid-
nineteenth century, has been a central question for scholars.³ Studies of
the WSPU in particular have frequently suggested that the relationship
between class and gender was deeply problematic. The dominant
historiographical narrative has largely been based around a sharp break
with the labour movement and a rejection of militancy by working-class
women, ultimately limiting the WSPU’s impact and influencing the
long-term relationship between the labour and feminist movements.⁴

However, scholars have identified many working-class women active
in the WSPU well beyond the supposed split with the labour movement.⁵

¹ ‘The Battle Cry’, Votes For Women (VFW), 17 October 1907, 10.
² Interview with Grace Roe, conducted by Brian Harrison, 4 October 1974, London,
LSE Library Collections, 8/SUF/B/013, Hannah Mitchell, The Hard Way Up: The
Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell (London, 1968), 159.
³ Sally Alexander, ‘Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and ‘30s’, in Sally
Alexander, eds., Becoming a Woman: And Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist
History (London, 1994); Gerry Holloway, ‘United We Stand: Class Issues in The Early
British Women’s Trade Union Movement’, in Mary Davis, ed., Class and Gender in British
Labour History: Renewing the Debate (Or Starting It?) (Pontypool, 2011).
⁴ Constance Rover, Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866–1914 (London,
1967), 75; RS Neale, ‘Working-Class Women and Women’s Suffrage’, in RS Neale, ed.,
Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century (London, 1972); Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden
From History (London, 1973), 77–100; Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, One Hand Tied Behind
Us: The Rise of the Women’s Suffrage Movement (London, 1978), 203–5; Sophia van
Wingerden, The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866–1928 (Basingstoke, 1999), 77;
Martin Pugh, The March of the Women: a Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s
Suffrage, 1866–1914 (Oxford, 2002), 171–233; Richard Whitmore, Alice Hawkins and the
Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Leicester (Derby, 2007).
⁵ June Purvis, ‘The Prison Experiences of the Suffragettes in Edwardian Britain’,
Women’s History Review, 4 (1994) 103, 133; 117, 120, Leah Leneman, A Guide Cause: The
Women’s Suffrage Movement in Scotland (Edinburgh, 1995), 52, 94, 111, 131; Jill Liddington,
Rebel Girls: Their Fight for the Vote (London, 2006); Molly Murphy, Molly Murphy: Suffragette
and Socialist (Salford, 1998); Whitmore, Alice Hawkins; Judith Smart, ‘Jennie Baines:
This has challenged the previously dominant idea that working-class women were irrelevant to the WSPU. Krista Cowman’s research has been invaluable in rejecting simplistic notions about the ‘break’ between the labour movement and the WSPU and in illustrating the complexities of class affiliations and identities. Historians have increasingly used women’s own accounts to develop a more nuanced analysis of attitudes to class within the WSPU, rather than dismissing them as propaganda. June Hannam, for example, uses the diaries of WSPU members Emily and Mary Blathwayt to show that the WSPU created a space where class hierarchies could be overcome in certain circumstances.

Yet women could not simply dismiss or erase the structures and significance of class, when it exerted such a powerful influence on economic opportunities, social hierarchies, cultural life, and individual identities beyond the organization. Historians including Laura Schwartz, Sandra Stanley Holton, and Cathy Hunt, have demonstrated that class remained a significant source of tension in activist organizations. The supposedly classless WSPU was by no means immune from these tensions. Sue Thomas, for example, has argued that solidarity was ‘fetishised’: suffragettes celebrated unity at the same time as stereotyping and marginalizing working-class women. Class, then, clearly continued to fracture and shape relations, even as women attempted to overcome these divisions and pursue a common goal.

This article argues that Annie Kenney’s suffragette career offers fresh insight into the way that class was represented, understood, and experienced within the WSPU. Initially, the WPSU made much of Annie Kenney’s social origins, a strategy that was particularly effective in

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Suffrage and an Australian Connection’, in June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton, eds, Votes for Women (London, 2002); Krista Cowman, Mrs Brown is a Man and a Brother: Women in Merseyside’s Political Organisations, 1890–1920 (Liverpool, 2004).

Krista Cowman, ‘“Crossing the Great Divide”: Inter-organizational Suffrage Relationships on Merseyside, 1895–1914’, in Clare Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini, eds, A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History (London, 2000), 143; Krista Cowman, ‘“Incipient Toryism”? The Women’s Social and Political Union and the Independent Labour Party, 1903–1914’, History Workshop Journal 53 (2002), 128–48; Krista Cowman, Women of the Right Spirit: Paid Organisers of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) 1904–18 (Manchester, 2007).

June Hannam, ‘“Suffragettes are Splendid for Any Work”’: The Blathwayt Diaries as a Source for Suffrage History’, in Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini, eds, A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History (London, 2000).

Laura Schwartz, ‘A Job Like Any Other? Feminist Responses and Challenges to Domestic Worker Organizing in Edwardian Britain’, International Labor and Working-Class History, 88 (2015), 30–48; Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘Silk Dresses and Lavender Kid Gloves: The Wayward Career of Jessie Craigen, Working Suffragist’, Women’s History Review, 5 (1996) 129–50; Cathy Hunt, The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906–1921 (Basingstoke, 2014), 28.

Sue Thomas, ‘Scenes in the Writing of “Constance Lytton and Jane Warton, Spinster”’; Contextualising a Cross-Class Dresser’, Women’s History Review, 12 (2003), 51–71, 53.
attracting press attention. However, positioning her as a representative of, and advocate for, all working-class women was problematic, since this assumed a homogeneity of experience which simply did not exist. As a result, Annie Kenney often struggled to understand and build meaningful connections with the very women she was supposed to represent. But as WSPU policy shifted towards recruiting middle-class women, these difficulties largely ceased to matter. Instead, the WSPU sought to celebrate Annie Kenney’s exceptional commitment to the cause to inspire wealthier women to follow suit. The relationships she formed with these middle-class women are best understood as substitute families. Yet though the depth of these relationships was extraordinary in the context of contemporary class relations, they remained exceptional. This article thus demonstrates that the significance of class within the WSPU was fluid and shifting rather than fixed and static. Though specifically focused on Annie Kenney, this article raises broader ideas about the role and representation of working-class women within the WSPU and the fight for women’s suffrage, indicating both the potential for, and barriers to, meaningful and lasting cross-class collaboration.

Annie Kenney was a factory worker in the Lancashire cotton mills from the age of 10. Drawn to the suffrage cause after hearing Christabel Pankhurst speak, she was among the earliest recruits to the WSPU. She is best-known for her actions in October 1905, when she and Christabel Pankhurst attended Sir Edward Grey’s meeting at the Free Trade Hall, and she demanded of him ‘will the Liberal Government give votes to women?’ This is widely understood as the first act of suffrage militancy. Kenney has long been celebrated as the most prominent working-class woman who took part in the militant campaign. Indeed, attention to her role has, ironically, obscured the many other working-class women who were instrumental to the WSPU. Yet her contribution to feminist politics and activism in this period has not been fully scrutinized until very recently. Indeed, in much of the historiography, she is reduced to little more than a caricature, whose politics were dictated by an unhealthy fixation on Christabel Pankhurst and who had a limited impact on the organization as a whole.

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10 Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (London, 1974), 76; Neale, ‘Working-Class Women’, 167.
11 Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London, 1931) 187 and 208, 195, 197; Liddington and Norris, *One Hand*, 86; Rosen, *Rise Up Women!*, 43; Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts: The History of One Radical Family* (London, 2001), 212; David Mitchell, *Queen Christabel: A Biography of Christabel Pankhurst* (London, 1977), 184; Brian Harrison, ‘Kenney, Annie (b. 1879–d. 1953)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, September 2009) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34285> accessed 1 October 2014.
Yet Annie Kenney was clearly much more than Christabel Pankhurst’s puppet. Many suffragette autobiographies testify to her centrality to the organization, a point that has been developed in several shorter or popular studies.\(^{12}\) Jill Liddington has suggested that, after the Pankhursts, she was ‘the most daring and influential of the Suffragettes’.\(^{13}\) June Hannam’s study of Annie Kenney’s work in Bristol has challenged the simple notion of Kenney as a devoted follower, indicating how far and frequently she acted on her own initiative.\(^{14}\) Diane Atkinson’s recent study of WSPU activists underscores the importance of Kenney’s leadership throughout the campaign.\(^{15}\) June Purvis argues that the partnership between Kenney and Pankhurst was essential to the effective functioning of the WSPU.\(^{16}\) This article adds to this developing historiography, which reinscribes the centrality of women’s own agency and motivation within the WSPU. Analysing Annie Kenney’s public representation and private relationships helps demonstrate how women themselves attempted to navigate the complicated terrain of class hierarchies and gendered inequality.

### The Construction, Uses, and Reception of Annie Kenney’s Image

Kristina Huneault’s study of the visual representations of working-class women in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods has shown that images of working-class women ‘destabilised major categories of social taxonomy’, disrupting middle-class notions of both gender and class.\(^{17}\) Her research teases out the meanings associated with different forms of work but is focused on visual culture and on how the middle-class viewer was likely to read and interpret the various ways working-class women were represented. This section develops her work by considering how visual representations of Annie Kenney were both reinforced

12 Millicent Price, *This World’s Festival*, unpublished autobiography, London, LSE Library Collections, 7/MPR/01; Clara Codd, *So Rich a Life* (Pretoria, 1951); Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London, 1938); Mary Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance* (London, 1955); Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote* (London, 1957); Fran Abrams, *Freedom’s Cause: Lives of the Suffragettes* (London, 2003), 41–59; Karen Bouffard-Gilbreath, ‘Annie Kenney: Militant Suffragette’ (Georgia State University, 1983), Wendy Cooper, ‘Annie Kenney—Pankhurst Servant or Feminist Leader?’ (University of Buckingham, 2013).

13 Quoted in Harrison, ‘Annie Kenney’.

14 Hannam, ‘Suffragettes are Splendid’.

15 Diane Atkinson, *Rise Up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (London, 2018).

16 June Purvis, *Christabel Pankhurst: A Biography* (London, 2018), especially 272–6, and 88.

17 Kristina Huneault, *Difficult Subjects: Working Women and Visual Culture, Britain 1880–1914* (Aldershot, 2003), 5.
Figure 1
Annie Kenney posed in ‘mill girl’ attire c. 1907. Museum of London, 50.82/1290. © Museum of London.
and complicated by her words and actions and the often contradictory meanings that both she and the WSPU sought to utilize.

The suffragettes’ uses of imagery, iconography, and propaganda as they set out to make themselves and by extension, their cause, shockingly visible, has been well documented. Suffragettes countered stereotypes of bluestockings, harridans, and hooligans with images of idealized womanhood. Images of working-women, as Lisa Tickner has shown, had particular significance: positioning the vote as a means to increase employment rights and protections for working-class women and demonstrating that the campaign was inclusive and diverse. In this context, Annie Kenney had enormous symbolic power for the WSPU. She was supposed to be, in Diane Atkinson’s words, their ‘working-class heroine’. Annie Kenney’s visual appearance, with the clogs and shawl that identified her as a working-woman, was therefore celebrated by the suffragettes, turned into postcards and displayed in shop windows (Fig. 1).

Annie Kenney’s image resonated beyond the organization itself, and newspapers rarely missed an opportunity to comment on her appearance. One described her as ‘a romantic and defiant figure in the shawl of a millhand’, while another wrote that she ‘appeared in the garb of the cotton operatives, wearing her hair in a plait down the back, and having her feet shod with the wooden clogs peculiar to the mill girl’. Kenney herself expressed this appeal simply as the allure of difference: ‘We are all interested in the thing we do not possess! Mystery is always attractive … the clogs and shawl would attract not only the public but Parliamentarians, who, like all people, look forward to a change’. Yet, the political resonance of her image went well beyond novelty value. Like the Chartists’ use of the fustian jacket and the cap of liberty, the clogs and shawl were clearly what Katrina Navickas has called ‘political clothing … an articulation of both individual self and collective identity’. The clogs and shawl were a vital part of the suffragettes’ strategy to claim legitimacy through appeals to historical precedent. Kenney was well aware of the strategic significance of her appearance and prepared to capitalize on it.

18 Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914* (London, 1988), Barbara Green, *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage 1905–1938* (London, 1997).

19 Brian Harrison who is sceptical about Annie Kenney’s importance to the WSPU, nevertheless concludes her value lay in this symbolic power. Harrison, ‘Annie Kenney’.

20 Diane Atkinson, ‘Six Suffragette Photographs’, in Maroula Joannou and June Purvis, eds, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester, 1998), 90.

21 London Daily News, 21 March 1907, 7.

22 Fife Free Press & Kirkcaldy Guardian, 23 March 1907, 2.

23 Annie Kenney, *Memories of a Militant* (London, 1924), 113–4.

24 Katrina Navickas, ‘“That Sash Will Hang You”: Political Clothing and Adornment in England, 1780–1840’, *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (2010), 540–65, 543.

25 Tickner, *Spectacle of Women*. 
Her dress not only identified her as working-class but carried a variety of meanings. On the one hand, the mill-girl could be a romantic, even heroic, figure, distinguishable from the ‘sweated’ worker by her spirit, dignity, and independence, and even envied for these qualities by middle-class women. At the same time, however, she possessed an unstable, even unruly quality. As Amy Montz has argued, obvious and visible difference from the middle-class observer or reader meant that suffragettes identified as working-class could be forgiven ‘any unorthodox or militant methods ... because she might not know any better’. En masse, then, working-class women could be seen as hostile, and Annie Kenney—‘the fiery card-room operative’—was not afraid to exploit this; for example, promising to march a thousand working women to Parliament. Several newspapers rightly called this a ‘threat’. Kenney told one audience, rejecting the genteel tactics of polite protest, which had dominated suffrage campaigning until the militant intervention. She told another audience that ‘she would not rest content until the clogs of Lancashire and Yorkshire women rattled on the floor of the House of Commons’. Sometimes she would situate this threat in a tradition of radical working-class protest, again making the links to Chartism explicit. As such, Annie Kenney’s clogs and shawl were not just a benign signal of her working-class origins but carried an implicit menace.

The clogs and shawl also provided Annie Kenney herself with a licence for dramatic action. On an early deputation to Campbell-Bannerman, Mary Ann Rawle, another suffrage activist, commented admiringly on her daring: ‘Miss Kenny [sic] (the only Lady with clogs and shawl on) got up on her cane bottomed chair and called out, “Sir Henry We are not satisfied and the fight will go on” [sic]’. Similarly, in March 1906, she jumped on a car in Downing Street while part of a deputation. Interviewed that year for an article that claimed the women ‘fought like men’, ‘little Miss Kenny’ [sic] was portrayed as enjoying pitched street-battles, showing off her bruises, describing the ‘splendid time’ she was having in fighting, and threatening further

26 On the power and resilience of these images, see Billie Melman, ““A Lass of Lancashire”: The Mill Girl as Emblem of Working-Class Virtues’, in Billie Melman, ed., Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties (Basingstoke, 1988).
27 Amy L. Montz, ‘Dressing For England: Fashion and Nationalism in Victorian Novels’, (Texas A&M University 2008), 211.
28 Leeds Mercury, 21 May 1906, 5.
29 Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser, 31 May 1907, 7, Leeds Mercury, 31 May 1907, 5, Bolton Evening News, 31 May 1907, 2.
30 Nottingham Evening Post, 10 September 1906, 6.
31 Sheffield Evening Telegraph, 8 March 1907, 5.
32 London Daily News, 1 February 1907, 12.
33 Mary Ann Rawle, ‘A Report of the Day’s Proceedings in London on the 19th of May 1906’, London, LSE Library Collections, 7/MAR/04/11.
34 Rosen, Rise Up Women!, 65.
action against Asquith.\textsuperscript{35} The clogs and shawl, which implied a capacity for rowdiness and violence, could be used to justify this behaviour.

As a WSPU organizer, however, Annie Kenney tended to wear factory girl clothing on particular occasions, rather than on a daily basis. When Hannah Mitchell first met Annie and her sister Jessie Kenney, they were ‘wearing dark costumes of excellent quality’, and she said that when Annie addressed crowds in London ‘in a frock of pale lettuce green silk [she] looked more like an aristocrat from the West End than an Oldham factory girl’.\textsuperscript{36} Here, Kenney drew on an alternative WSPU strategy, which emphasized respectable femininity as another means of resisting stereotypes of suffragettes.\textsuperscript{37} Kenney believed that women’s clothing also needed to be practical, as well as attractive. ‘Annie thought dress and deportment very important’, Millicent Price wrote:

The dress she and Mary [Blathwayt] devised and which adopted, was very pleasant to look at, and particularly kind to non-corsetted figures. It was really a pinafore frock, with a white top to the purple or green slip smocked fully at the waist. We liked it for the freedom it gave us, and because it was short enough to collect no dust nor did it need a protective braiding.\textsuperscript{38}

When Kenney and other leading suffragettes were sculpted in wax for Madame Tussaud’s, her dress was not as elaborate as those of the other figures, but neither was she dressed in clogs and shawl (Fig. 2). This suggests that she was increasingly recognizable even without these symbols, though the sculptor may not have produced a good likeness. Mary Blathwayt, Kenney’s friend and comrade from Batheaston, noted ‘they are very badly done, but Annie’s is simply dreadful’.\textsuperscript{39}

The clogs and shawl that had made Annie Kenney so distinctive were now worn selectively: at national meetings, on deputations to the Prime Minister, and on marches through London.\textsuperscript{40} Some contemporary commentators perceived this as inauthentic. One suggested ‘that her brand-new woollen shawl and her coquettish clogs bore about as much resemblance to the everyday articles of the Lancashire streets as a field-marshall’s uniform bears to the working clothes of the militiaman after a month’s training’.\textsuperscript{41} There was an element of spectacle and performance

\textsuperscript{35}Dundee Evening Telegraph, 18 June 1906, 2.
\textsuperscript{36}Mitchell, \textit{Hard Way Up}, 127.
\textsuperscript{37}Katrina Rolley, ‘Fashion, Femininity and the Fight for the Vote’, \textit{Art History}, 13 (1990), 47–71; Maria Dicenzo, ‘Militant Distribution: Votes for Women and the Public Sphere’, \textit{Media History}, 6 (2000), 122–3.
\textsuperscript{38}Price, \textit{This World’s Festival}, 123.
\textsuperscript{39}Mary Blathwayt diary, 16 April 1909, Gloucester, Gloucestershire Archives.
\textsuperscript{40}See comments on Annie Kenney’s appearance in Rosen, \textit{Rise Up Women!}, 67 and 82.
\textsuperscript{41}Leeds Mercury, 21 May 1906, 5.
to her attire which some found cynical. Wendy Parkins has therefore argued that she wore ‘the traditional costume of the mill-worker on strategic occasions as a consciously communicative act, rather than an expression of an authentic identity’. This, however, overstates the case: it was both a strategic decision and an expression of authentic identity. Her decision not to dress in clogs and shawl on a daily basis during her work in London and the West of England was pragmatic. It indicates that Kenney was in control of her image, choosing when to make herself distinctive.

The clogs and shawl were all the more powerful when juxtaposed with other symbols and icons. This picture of Annie Kenney in clogs and shawl alongside Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy links the plight of the working-woman with long-standing campaigns for equal rights and

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42 Wendy Parkins, ‘Taking Liberty’s, Breaking Windows: Fashion, Protest and the Suffragette Public’, *Continuum*, 11 (1997), 37-46, 45.
Character Sketches.

At the Trafalgar Square Demonstration.

Miss Kenney and Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy, who is seventy-four, and the oldest of the advocates of Woman's Suffrage in this country.

Figure 3
Anniversary and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy. Review of Reviews, 1906, p. 587. © British Library.
locates the pair as the past and present of a women’s movement that transcended age as well as class (Fig. 3). The accompanying text by WT Stead compared her to Josephine Butler and to Joan of Arc, situating Kenney as the inheritor of a tradition of radical action carried out without regard to personal gain or safety. She was also positioned as equal and opposite to Christabel Pankhurst. Votes for Women described the pair as signifying, on the one hand, the ‘highly educated womanhood of modern times, on the other, the toiling millions of the manual workers’. In Teresa Billington-Greig’s words:

One of them was a mill-girl who had bitter experience of the restrictions to which working women are subjected. The other was a daughter of a lawyer, herself studying to be a lawyer. Together they represented the two forces which are the life of this new women’s agitation: the need of women as typified by Annie Kenney; and the rebellion of the educated women against restrictions . . . represented by Christabel Pankhurst.

This emphasis on the ‘need of women’, in Billington-Greig’s phrase, suggests that the WSPU largely saw working-class women as passive victims who needed their help, rather than active forces for change in their own lives. In part, this reflected unease about the dangers inherent in the ‘factory girl’ image. The factory worker and activist Ada Nield Chew had claimed that ‘we factory girls are aware of the public opinion of us. That we are regarded as quite the lowest class of female workers. As a noisy, cheeky, idle, ignorant, shallow, class of girls.’ From a sympathetic standpoint, the factory girl might represent independence, strength, and capability. Yet she could also stand for women’s vulnerability and need of protection or, conversely, appear potentially alarming and threatening. The WSPU was not the only organization that grappled with these contradictions. As Gillian Scott has noted, the Women’s Co-Operative Guild struggled to present working-class women as ‘strong, capable and assertive’ while also drawing attention to their need for help. Navigating these conflicting messages was fraught with difficulty.

43 W. T. Stead, ‘Character Sketch: Miss Annie Kenney, The Suffragette’, Review of Reviews 33 (1906), 583–87.
44 VFW, 9 June 1911, 610.
45 Aberdeen People’s Journal, 16 March 1907, 5.
46 Ada Nield Chew, ‘Life in a Crewe Factory’, 9 June 1894, quoted in Ada Nield Chew, The Life and Writings of Ada Nield Chew (London, 1982), 83.
47 Lynn Abrams, The Making of Modern Woman, Europe 1789–1989 (London, 2002), 18; Rover, Women’s Suffrage, 35–6.
48 Gillian Scott, Feminism and the Politics of Working Women: The Women’s Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War (Brighton, 1998), 65.
49 Huneault, Difficult Subjects, 193–203.
As a result, the WSPU was also keen to present Annie Kenney as someone who would not have seemed out of place in a drawing room. ‘With a keen perception of the beautiful and delicate in nature and in art, with a love of poetry and literature, Miss Kenney is one of the sensitive women of the day’, wrote Fred Pethick-Lawrence, while WT Stead reassured readers that ‘she is a woman of refinement and of delicacy of manner and speech’. Presenting Annie Kenney as an educated woman was essential to this strategy. Votes for Women claimed ‘her love of good books, and her reflective mind, made the mill her high school and her factory her university’. The WSPU thus attempted to both utilize and subvert popular images of the ‘factory girl’. While Annie Kenney was represented as ‘typical’ in her work experience, she was also positioned as ‘exceptional’ in her literacy, articulacy, and sensitivity. The WSPU did not attempt to challenge middle-class assumptions about, and stereotypes of, working-class culture. In her autobiography, for example, Kitty Marion was keen to assert that suffragettes were ‘intelligent, educated, (Upper class not “low hooligan”) women [sic]’. Rather, in general, the organization suggested that Annie Kenney was a rare and extraordinary individual. Only Hannah Mitchell, herself a working-class woman, suggested that Annie Kenney might embody a broader and more positive construction of factory women, describing her and Jessie Kenney as ‘fine examples of the self-respecting Lancashire mill-girl, intellectual and independent’.

This sense of Annie Kenney’s exceptionalism was also reflected in the popular press. Ingrained assumptions about uneducated factory girls meant that newspapers were often surprised by ‘the eloquence of the Lancashire Lass’, who ‘proved herself a female Demosthenes on many public platforms’. Another commented that she ‘speaks the King’s English perfectly with a delightful roll, the effect of which is heightened by her vivacity and her intense earnestness’. Clara Codd stated that she approached audiences ‘as a homely Lancashire lass would’, and much was made of her regional accent and vocabulary. The effect was compelling, especially when reinforced with all that was implied by the clogs and shawl.

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50 Fred Pethick-Lawrence, Annie Kenney: Character Sketch and Prison Faces (London, 1907), 2, Stead, ‘Character Sketch’, 584.
51 London Daily News, 15 August 1906, 12, ‘The Speakers’, VFW, 18 June 1908, 251.
52 Autobiography of Kitty Marion, 7KMA, London, LSE Library Collections, 170.
53 Mitchell, Hard Way Up, 127.
54 Portsmouth Evening News, 23 February 1906, 4.
55 Western Daily Press, 28 June 1909, 3.
56 Portsmouth Evening News, 3 September 1906, 3.
57 Codd, So Rich, 49, Phoebe Hesketh, My Aunt Edith (London, 1966), 50.
The clogs and shawl were clearly a potent reminder of Annie Kenney’s early experiences as a factory worker. Yet implicit in the use of this powerful symbol is the assumption that factory workers were synonymous with working-class women. The reality was very different. Though factory workers made up a large proportion of working-class women, their experiences were peculiar and specific. Compared with many other working women, factory workers had a high degree of independence and high wages and were often politically engaged and organized. Their experiences bore little resemblance to other groups of working women: whether lower-middle-class women in precarious white-collar employment, domestic servants, or sweatied workers. Barbara Green and Laura Schwartz have shown that these alternative experiences were marginalized in WSPU representations of working women. As such, positioning Annie Kenney as an archetypal working-class woman was problematic. This article now turns to examine how working-class women themselves responded to Annie Kenney.

The Uses and Limitations of Common Experience as the Basis for Common Cause with Working-Class Women

Annie Kenney played a central role in the WSPU’s early efforts to recruit working-class women to the militant cause. At ILP meetings and factory gates, she made speeches that emphasized the strength of working-class women and the power they could exert by organizing under the auspices of the women’s movement. She argued that ‘the women’s movement was a great one, and if they had the whole-hearted sympathy of every working woman their efforts would come to speedy fruition’. Annie Kenney’s credibility with these audiences derived from her life-experience in the factory, and her arguments about why women needed the vote were grounded in her understanding of factory life. She said that ‘she had been trained in the bitter school of experience, and her duty as a worker lay among the workers’. Wearing clogs and a shawl at the same time was a visual indication of shared experience.

In industrialized communities where the ‘factory girl’ experience was common, audiences could empathize with, and be inspired by, Annie Kenney. Women who may not have previously been interested in suffrage sometimes responded with deep emotion to Kenney. Miss Armstrong from Preston, a mill-worker from the age of 13, saw her

58 Green, Spectacular Confessions, 30–35; Laura Schwartz, ‘The Wrong Kind of Working-Class Woman? Domestic Servants in British Suffrage Novels’, (unpublished paper, delivered November 2016, North American Conference on British Studies, Washington, DC).

59 Lancashire Evening Post, 26 June 1907, 4.

60 Nottingham Evening Post, 10 September 1906, 6.
speak ‘and became fired with a desire to throw herself heart and soul into the movement’. \footnote{Preston Herald, 27 March 1907, 4.} Audiences could easily interpret Annie Kenney in the tradition of female ILP campaigners, albeit one who stressed gendered oppression. This ability to connect with particular audiences explains why Keir Hardie wanted Kenney to campaign on his behalf. \footnote{VFW, 11 June 1908, 230, Kenney, \textit{Memories}, 57.}

Unsurprisingly, Annie Kenney felt most at home with women from Lancashire and Yorkshire. This was not only owing to a common set of experiences at work but also because of a shared respect for the politics of Robert Blatchford and Keir Hardie and an understanding of daily life beyond employment. Her dress and accent marked her not only as ‘working-class’ but as ‘one of us’, appealing to regional identity, as well as class affiliation.

However, despite a shared past, Kenney’s increasing fame separated her from other working-class women in the present. She told one audience that ‘it is my duty, because I lived and worked amongst you in the cotton trade for many years, to point out to you as clearly as possible the danger which threatens your right to work’ and explaining the consequences, as if women were unaware of these issues. \footnote{‘To the Married Women Textile Workers’, \textit{VFW}, 21 May 1908, 182.}

Here, she underlined both her similarity to, and difference from, her audience. The knowledge she had gained from her political campaigning had given her a new means of understanding and analysing her experience, which, she implied, women unenlightened by the women’s movement did not have access to.

Annie Kenney struggled to understand in any meaningful way the lives of women outside industrialized communities. On arrival in London, for example, she set out to study the needs of the most deprived women she could think of: vagrants and tramps. But while she saw the individual humanity in each woman—‘all were greatly interesting, and to me human souls’—she also had a tendency to romanticize and sentimentalize their experience. \footnote{Kenney, \textit{Memories}, 62.}

Claiming she looked forward to a similar itinerant life once the vote was won indicates that she failed to appreciate the genuine hardship and poverty experienced by homeless travellers. \footnote{Kenney, \textit{Memories}, 111.}

Kenney was not immune from the WSPU’s tendency to use stereotyped images of working-class women. In her autobiography, Lancashire women were patronizingly praised for their housekeeping, and East End women were characterized as downtrodden, in ways which drew on regional, as well as class-based clichés. \footnote{Kenney, \textit{Memories}, 131–2 and see below.}

Similarly, a series of vignettes she wrote after coming out of prison in
1906 reduced her fellow-prisoners to caricatures: mother of illegitimate baby, older woman in poverty, matriarch trying to make ends meet. To her, these women were victims and symbols of oppression, rather than individuals with agency and power.

Annie Kenney had sufficient self-awareness to occasionally express discomfort at her failures of understanding. She was, for example, perceived as an outsider by women at the nascent WSPU branch in Canning Town, where she spent some time working in her early years in London. ‘Miss Kenney Came [sic] among us as angels do’ read the minutes for one meeting. In retrospect, Kenney recognized that the vote may not have been the answer to these women’s needs. ‘How I had the courage and audacity to talk Votes for Women to those thin, sallow, pinched, pain-stricken, poverty-lined faces I do not know’, she wrote in her autobiography. ‘Poor oppressed, unawakened East-Enders – every reformer using them for his own ends, and we were doing just the same!’ Unlike, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst, Kenney found it too difficult to live and work among these women as an equal. Indeed, she argued that ‘those who have a real desire to help the suffering masses in the East End should not live there ... I have never seen such hopeless despair, such agonizing poverty, as I saw in the East End of London.

Annie Kenney appears to have had little faith in working-class women’s ability to bring about their own emancipation. In Votes for Women, she described ‘the great responsibility we have taken on our shoulders to free the women’ of Lancashire and Yorkshire, suggesting she doubted their capacity to free themselves. She also described Constance Lytton’s ‘passion for the working-class women in the movement ... she loved them and they loved her’. Here, she frames working-class women as ‘them’ rather than ‘us’, implicitly positioning herself outside the working-classes while simultaneously staking a claim for class solidarity.

During the early years of campaigning, the WSPU used Annie Kenney’s experience as a factory worker, particularly as an elected trade union official, to claim that she represented working-class women in the organization and could effectively represent them to the wider world. She announced to one audience, ‘I am Miss Annie Kenney and I have come specially from Lancashire, where I represent sixty-nine women.

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67 Pethick-Lawrence, Annie Kenney, 9–12.
68 Minute Book of the Canning Town WSPU, 10 April 1906, London, Museum of London, 50.82/1133.
69 Kenney, Memories, 68.
70 Kenney, Memories, 71.
71 ‘Feeling in Lancashire and Yorkshire’, VFW, February 1908, 74.
72 Kenney, Memories, 88.
thousand women cotton operatives.73 In Sylvia Pankhurst’s words, she was ‘Annie Kenney, a mill girl, who had gone to work in a cotton factory at ten years of age, a working woman, the child of a working woman, whose life had been passed amongst the workers … the representative of thousands of struggling women, and in their name she asked for justice’.74 Yet, both Kenney and the WSPU appear to have assumed that she would be able to represent not only this particular group of working-class women but all working-class women. In doing so, they underestimated the degree of variation in, and specificity of, working-class experience. They overlooked occupational, local, and cultural distinctions, which were also hugely significant, and assumed that the concerns of the factory workers that Kenney knew best were common to all working-class women. Their disinterest in these distinctions meant that they did not appreciate their ongoing significance.

Constructing the Model Suffragette

As suggested in the introduction, arguments that the WSPU made a definitive break with the labour movement do not accurately reflect the complexities of the organization’s relationship with working-class women, especially at a local level. Nevertheless, it is possible to see distinctive changes in the way that Annie Kenney was positioned as the WSPU set out to recruit more middle-class women. In this context, the WSPU increasingly celebrated Annie Kenney’s commitment to the suffrage cause rather than her prior experience in the factory. Her interventions took on almost mythical importance and were situated as defining moments in the narrative of suffrage militancy. Her ‘interruption’ of Sir Edward Grey, her subsequent prison sentence, and her move south to ‘rouse London’ were regularly repeated in Votes for Women to encourage other women to become militant. It was the power of this myth rather than its strict accuracy that mattered. ‘Two women against the whole world—that was the start of this movement’, the WSPU newspaper proclaimed in 1908.75 The clogs and shawl that had made Annie Kenney so distinctive were less visible, and she increasingly spoke to ‘At Homes’ and assembly rooms, rather than at ILP meetings and factory gates. In the 1910 ‘Prison to Citizenship’ procession, Kenney chose to identify herself not as a working woman but as a prisoner, dressed in white and equipped with a silver-tipped arrow, rather than the clogs and shawl with which she had previously been synonymous. This changed public image signalled dignified endurance and was

73 Manchester Courier, 3 March 1906, 7.
74 ‘The History of the Suffrage Movement’, VFW, 1 October 1908, 3.
75 ‘The History of the Suffrage Movement’, VFW, 3 December 1908, 163.
underscored by her public example of spirited bravery. Supporters commented on her ‘indomitable spirit’, even in prison, where ‘she whistled and always encouraged her colleagues with smiles and cheering remarks’. As such, she personified the courage and wholehearted commitment that the WSPU hoped to inspire among its members.

Annie Kenney’s own experiences in the WSPU informed her belief that a shift in policy was necessary. In the early years of the campaign, she had urged the Canning Town women to fully participate in militant demonstrations. Yet, she also recognized the practical constraints on working-class women’s lives. In February 1908, she reminded the Women’s Parliament that before attending, working-women ‘had to bake the bread, to do the washing, and prepare for their husbands and families’ and thus ‘urged the women of social standing present to fight for the cause themselves, and to go to prison if necessary and not to let the working-women do all the fighting’. For Kenney, shifting middle-class women to the forefront of militancy did not represent a break with, or disavowal of, working-class women. Rather, it was a necessary response to the barriers they faced, which made militancy particularly difficult. Middle-class women would have to shoulder the burden instead. Historians have often been critical of this strategy, seeing it as one of the factors which detached the WSPU from its more radical origins within the labour movement. Yet, both empathy and realism were clearly at play in Kenney’s decision-making. It should not then be understood as a betrayal of her origins.

In her new role as an idealized suffragette, Annie Kenney was undoubtedly effective in recruiting the middle-class women which the WSPU aimed to attract. She ‘talked turkey in a strong Lancashire accent to the bluest blood in England’, stated the writer Ida Wylie, ‘and the Blue Blood sat up and took notice’. Many different women responded to her evident passion and emotional commitment to the cause and directly attributed their involvement to her inspirational example. Among those who directly cited Annie Kenney as a defining influence include major activists, such as Mary Richardson, seasoned

76. London Daily News, 18 February 1908, 9.
77. Kenney, Memories, 90.
78. ‘Women’s Parliament and the House of Commons’, VFW, March 1908, 82.
79. van Wingerden, The Women’s Suffrage Movement, 77, Pugh, The Pankhursts, 164.
80. I. A. R. Wylie, My Life With George: An Unconventional Autobiography (New York, 1940) 168.
81. Codd, So Rich, 45–6, Interview with Grace Roe, conducted by Brian Harrison, 23 September 1974, London, LSE Library Collections, 8/SUF/B/007.
campaigners like Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, and perhaps most significantly, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, WSPU treasurer. After 1912, when the WSPU embarked on more extreme militant strategies, the tendency to emphasize her actions, rather than her background was even more apparent. With Christabel Pankhurst in exile in Paris, Emmeline Pankhurst often in prison or America, and the Pethick-Lawrences ousted from the movement, Annie Kenney played an essential role in demonstrating to members that they were not being abandoned or exploited by their leaders. She set an example of loyalty, discipline, and commitment to the Pankhursts and encouraged others to follow her lead.

Annie Kenney’s physical body remained central to her revised position as the ideal suffragette. Following her arrest on conspiracy charges in April 1913, she lived as a ‘mouse’ for more than a year. Since the clogs and shawl would give an obvious clue to her identity, she was disguised in a range of alternative costumes from a ‘flashy East End coster type’ to an ‘ordinary’ woman with ‘furs and eye-glasses’. Profoundly weakened by repeated hunger strikes, she was often unable to walk or speak and was carried around on a stretcher, appearing theatrically on stage. The dramatic and staged quality of these encounters had a distinctly darker tone than her earlier public appearances. The frailty of her physical person was explicitly contrasted with the intensity of her commitment. For example, in August 1913, The Suffragette described her as:

A little figure dressed in a long black coat, a little frail ghost of a thing with a face still and drawn from her four days’ hunger strike – nothing left of it, it almost seemed, but the unquenchable courage and spirit which makes the movement indomitable.

Suffragettes responded with adoration and outrage, interrupting services at churches and cathedrals to pray for her and attempting to beat back police to protect her. Her appearances were both a reward for the suffragettes’ efforts in extreme militant actions, such as arson, and an admonishment to do yet more. The Suffragette also asserted that ‘the arrest of Miss Annie Kenney will inevitably be taken as a fresh incitement to militancy’—consciously echoing the charge of incitement.

82 Richardson, Laugh a Defiance, 81, Maureen Wright, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and the Victorian Feminist Movement: The Biography of an Insurgent Woman (Manchester, 2011) 192, Pethick-Lawrence, My Part, 147.
83 Kenney, Memories, 252.
84 ‘The Iniquitous ‘Cat-And-Mouse’ Act Breaking Down’, The Suffragette, 8 August 1913, 743.
85 For example, The Suffragette, 21 November 1913, 130.
Figure 4
Front page of The Suffragette, 10 October 1913, 897. Her smile and apparent willing submission are a marked contrast to the headline. Newspaper image © Unknown successor rightsholder. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).
she faced—and carried regular reports on her health in order to generate outrage at her treatment by the authorities (Fig. 4). After one surprise appearance in April 1914, Flora Drummond said to the assembled crowd, ‘I wonder how many of you tonight have realized the determination that is behind the action of Miss Kenney in coming here. If I were to pick one of you to do as she has done, you would shrink behind your chair.’ Little wonder, then, that one newspaper called her ‘The Champion Militant’.

The changing uses of Annie Kenney’s image raises important questions about agency and autonomy, such as what she understood her role to be, and how far she embraced it, or simply accepted it as necessary. Contemporary critics believed she was being exploited. Teresa Billington-Greig argued that ‘at one time the propagandists of the movement made much publicity on “Annie Kenney, The Suffragette Mill Girl” lines which she deeply disliked. Yet she bore it with patience for many years.’ Annie’s brother Rowland Kenney published a scathing critique of working-class women in the militant movement in 1912. ‘Their minds were easily played upon by the displayed smartness and wealth of their leaders’, he argued, ‘they liked to be amongst women who were obviously clever, well-bred and in easy circumstances; it flattered their vanity and was a welcome change in life, which, God knows, they needed’. Billington-Greig suggests that Kenney acquiesced in her role: Rowland Kenney implies rather that she was being manipulated. Both suggest that Kenney exemplifies the unthinking obedience and mindless devotion of the fanatical suffragette, which has been reflected in much of the historiography. David Mitchell, for example, called her a ‘splendid marketable commodity’.

In fact, Annie Kenney made ongoing pragmatic decisions about the most effective strategies to advance the cause and how she might best contribute to these. Indeed, she herself told Billington-Greig that ‘the excluded must use whatever weapons they can seize’. Nor should we assume that the conclusions she reached were simply the result of Christabel Pankhurst’s influence. There is no suggestion, for example, that Pankhurst either asked or expected Kenney to risk her life through the trauma of repeated force feedings. Kenney appears to have accepted

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86 The Suffragette, 11 April 1913, 419, 10 October 1913, 907, 28 November 1913, 144.
87 Quoted in Antonia Raeburn, The Militant Suffragettes (London, 1973), 245.
88 Dundee Evening Telegraph, 7 October 1913, 2.
89 Elizabeth Crawford, The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland (London, 2008), 313.
90 Rowland Kenney, ‘The Militant Movement in Ruins’, The English Review, XIII (1912), 104.
91 Mitchell, Queen Christabel, 214.
92 Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald, eds, The Non-Violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig (London, 1987), 99.
the possibility of death in service of the cause, not because she was told to do so but because she had independently reached the conclusion that it might be necessary.

Moreover, it is as important to see the continuities in Annie Kenney’s public representation as the changes. Though her dress changed, she claimed she ‘had no desire to dress up every day and carry a sunshade and wear white gloves’.\(^93\) She never denied or rejected her ‘working-woman’ identity. Indeed, it remained strategically useful. In her trial for conspiracy in 1913, for example, she made several references to her childhood and work experience, and when travelling to the USA in 1914, for example, she attributed her warm welcome to the fact that she had previously been a trade unionist.\(^94\)

**Friendship, Love, Collaboration, and their Limits**

The relationships that Annie Kenney formed with middle- and upper-class women were far more meaningful than those which she developed with working-class women. In her autobiography, she seldom singles out working-class women as individuals—Minnie Baldock, from the Canning Town branch, is a rare exception—but writes extensively about her friendships with middle-class women. Friendship has increasingly been seen as central to social and political change across this period, perhaps particularly for women who, lacking access to formal and institutional structures, relied on informal networks in their campaigning.\(^95\) This was especially important within the WSPU, as it give women the confidence and courage to engage in militancy, as well as underpinning local activist networks.\(^96\) As a result, Sandra Stanley Holton has suggested the WSPU was underpinned by ‘webs of love and friendship’.\(^97\)

Yet historians have often been sceptical about the degree to which middle-class and working-class women were able to form friendships and alliances grounded in genuine appreciation and understanding: the social gulf was too great and sincere intentions might be experienced as

\(^{93}\) ‘I am a Rebel’, *The Suffragette*, 20 June 1913, 9, Kenney, *Memories*, 277.

\(^{94}\) Kenney, *Memories*, 259.

\(^{95}\) Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London, 1985); Marc Brodie and Barbara Caine, ‘Class, Sex and Friendship: The Long Nineteenth Century’, in Barbara Caine, ed., *Friendship: A History* (London, 2009); Ellen Ross, ‘St Francis in Soho: Emmeline Pethick, Mary Neal, the West London Wesleyan Mission, and the Allure of “Simple Living” in the 1890s’, *Church History*, 83 (2014), 843–83.

\(^{96}\) Cowman, *The Right Spirit*, 155; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories From the Women’s Suffrage Movement* (London, 1996), 11.

\(^{97}\) Sandra Stanley Holton, ‘Reflecting on Suffrage History’, in Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini, eds, *A Suffrage Reader* (London, 2000), 30. Liz Stanley and Anne Morley, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison: A Biographical Detective Story* (London, 1988) shows this in operation.
patronizing. Friendship within the WSPU has also sometimes been read not as friendship but as something suspect and deviant. Annie Kenney has been singled out as an activist whose politics were based on romantic attachments rather than sincere beliefs. Andrew Rosen states that she ‘apparently lacked interest in young men her own age’, while Martin Pugh asserts that ‘she slept so frequently with her female friends and colleagues that it would be surprising if her feelings were not those of a lesbian’. Such assertions are clearly not an attempt to sensitively reconstruct women’s intimate relationships but rather serve to insinuate that women’s political commitment to the WSPU was actually a personal commitment to its members.

Yet as June Purvis has argued, there is very little evidence that this is the best frame through which to understand Annie Kenney’s relationships with other women. While Mary Blathwayt’s diary does refer to Kenney ‘sleeping’ with other women, she wrote very literally, and it seems more likely that ‘sleeping’ did not have sexual connotations. Clara Codd explained that she often shared a bed with Annie Kenney to save money. It is clear that Annie Kenney did have extremely strong feelings for Christabel Pankhurst, claiming that ‘there is a cord between Christabel and me that nothing can break—the cord of love’. But as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg reminds us, such terms of endearment are not necessarily an indication of romantic love but simply a reflection of the heightened language that women might use to describe intense friendships. The rich literature on women’s friendships in this period shows that women understood and expressed their relationships in ways that bear little resemblance to contemporary understandings. There were, of course, romantic relationships between women in the WSPU, which a number of sensitive and

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98 Seth Koven, Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London (Oxford, 2004); Seth Koven, The Match Girl and the Heiress (London, 2015); Mark Peel, Miss Cutler and the Case of the Resurrected Horse: Social Work and the Story of Poverty in America, Australia, and Britain (London, 2012).
99 George Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England (London, 1936) 154.
100 Rosen, Rise Up Women!, 43, Pugh, The Pankhursts, 212.
101 For example, Pugh, The Pankhursts, 212–3.
102 June Purvis, Emmeline Pankhurst: A Biography (London, 2003), 143.
103 Codd, So Rich, 46.
104 Kenney, Memories, 289.
105 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America,’ Signs, 1 (1975), 1–29.
106 Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (London, 1985), Martha Vicinus, Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778–1928 (London, 2004); Sharon Marcus, Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England (Oxford, 2007).
thoughtful studies have brought to the fore. Others have used the methodological approaches of queer studies to consider the ways that women resisted and inverted cultural expectations in their relationships, without seeking to impose modern understandings and vocabularies unavailable to the women involved. These studies insist that understanding women’s relationships in their particular context is critical. This call for specificity is echoed by Krista Cowman and Heloise Brown, whose essay on suffrage friendship argues that it is not enough to identify and recover the networks involved: it is necessary to understand ‘the meanings or consequences’.

Interpreting Annie Kenney’s relationships with other women as simply romantic both oversimplifies them and overlooks her own interpretation of their meaning and significance. She herself regularly drew on the descriptive language of family to convey the depth of her relationships with other individuals, calling herself the granddaughter of WT Stead and the ‘adopted daughter’ of the Pethick-Lawrences. James Taylor, whom she married after her career in the women’s movement ended, even claimed that ‘at one stage Keir Hardie almost wanted to adopt her as a daughter’. The Pankhurs, however, were her most significant alternative family. After Annie Kenney was released from prison in 1905, Emmeline Pankhurst promised that Annie would always have a home with her. This promise of a home so soon after her own mother had died and ‘the cement of love that held the home life together disappeared’ was a major factor in giving her the confidence and security she needed to continue with militancy.

If Annie Kenney’s role in the Pankhurst family was central to her place in the national organization, her role in the Blathwayt family was equally important in enabling her work as a regional organizer. June Hannam’s study of this relationship has highlighted how this relationship transcended class barriers. Mary Blathwayt became a combination of Annie Kenney’s friend, sister, secretary, and domestic servant. She lavished Kenney with loving care, washing her hair, doing

107 Stanley and Morley, *Emily Wilding Davison*; Stanley Holton, ‘Jessie Craigen’; Anna Kisby, ‘Vera “Jack” Holme: Cross-Dressing Actress, Suffragette and Chauffeur’, *Women’s History Review*, 23 (2014), 120–36.
108 Katharine Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art* (London, 2017); Liz Stanley, ‘Romantic Friendship? Some Issues in Researching Lesbian History and Biography’, *Women’s History Review*, 1 (1992), 193–216.
109 Heloise Brown and Krista Cowman, ‘Exploring Suffrage Friendships’, in Ruth A. Synes, Ann Kaloski, and Heloise Brown, eds, *Celebrating Women’s Friendship: Past, Present and Future* (York, 1999), 152.
110 Kenney, *Memories*, 65 and 72.
111 Interview with James Taylor, conducted by Brian Harrison on 23 October 1974, London, LSE Women’s Library Collection 8/SUF/B/020.
112 Kenney, *Memories*, 41.
113 Kenney, *Memories*, 26.
114 Hannam, ‘Suffragettes are Splendid’, 60.
her mending, and carrying out numerous domestic chores. Kenney frequently went to stay with the Blathwayt parents—Colonel Linley and Emily—while Mary was away, and treated their home as her own, frequently staying in bed all day to recover from campaigning. This was not a relationship between the two women alone but a bringing together of two families. Three of Annie’s sisters—Jessie, Jane and Caroline Kenney—were also absorbed into the Blathwayt family and treated as surrogate daughters. The Blathways had Jane and Caroline to stay for an extended period during 1910, arranging—and presumably paying for—their hospital care. The Blathwayt home thus to a great extent became the Kenneys’ home.

Kenney was also embraced by the Lytton family, an aristocratic clan with close ties to the political elite and the royal family. As Diane Atkinson writes, ‘Constance Lytton’s “family” expanded and diversified the moment she joined the WSPU.’ Constance Lytton admired Kenney as a ‘woman of great character, courage and ability’, who provided an intellectual and emotional rationale for women’s suffrage that ‘began to lift the scales of ignorance from my eyes’. As Lytton recognized, while she was clearly Kenney’s social superior outside the WSPU, within the organization, the hierarchy was reversed. She asked Annie and Jessie to address her as ‘Sister Conny’ and signed herself as such in letters, though they did not take to the idea. Kenney worked with Lytton’s sister Betty Balfour to lobby her brother-in-law, Arthur Balfour, and developed an affectionate friendship with Constance’s mother, Edith Lytton, which outlasted Constance’s own death. Despite Edith’s dislike of militant suffrage, she wrote with great fondness to Annie ‘my dear daughter Con friend and my own also I hope as you are a sister of Con’s & we can always find sympathy and help in each other’. Loving personal relationships between a dowager Duchess and former Vicereine of India, and a militant suffragette and former factory worker, were, of course, highly atypical. As this suggests, Kenney’s friendships consistently transcended generation, as well as class, providing her with alternative mother-figures who could be relied on to provide advice and support.

The Kenneys derived many practical and material benefits from these relationships. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence showered Annie and Jessie with affection, clothing, and holidays. Helen Archdale allowed...
them to use her home, staff, and money while she was in prison.\textsuperscript{122} Jane and Caroline Kenney, though not full-time activists, used their connections within the suffrage movement as a means to advance their careers in teaching in progressive and rewarding roles across the world.\textsuperscript{123} There were more intangible benefits in the form of social and cultural capital too. At the Blathwayt home, Linley taught Annie to drive; Jennie learned chess and Jessie learned billiards; and Mary gave Annie and Kitty lessons in swimming and French.\textsuperscript{124} The warm welcome that the Kenney sisters were assured of in all these families offered them a guarantee of security. These relationships provided Annie Kenney and her sisters both with the means of carrying out their work and the opportunity for relaxation and respite away from it. Friendship—across generations, as well as across classes—was thus central to sustaining the Kenneys’ political activism.

It was Annie Kenney’s evident commitment to the cause which enabled her to transcend the barriers of class and construct a place at the heart of these families. While working-class women experienced a gap between Kenney’s claims to represent them and her actual understanding of their lives, for middle-class women, the alternative image of Kenney as the idealized suffragette rang absolutely true. As a result, they embraced her wholeheartedly. The historical literature on cross-class women’s friendships is primarily focused on the friendships that arose as a result of social intervention programmes, since this is how women from different backgrounds were most likely to meet.\textsuperscript{125} Within the WSPU, however, women encountered Kenney on different terms: as an equal and as a worker in the cause. Yet, while this indicates some of the opportunities for cross-class collaboration within the WSPU, there were also limits. Kenney’s total commitment to the cause—enabled by her positions as a paid organizer—was not available to the vast majority of working-class women. This suggests that women could, in some instances, transcend the divisions of class but only when they ‘earned the right’. As a result, within the contemporary political and social context, such collaboration was undoubtedly extraordinary but remained exceptional.

\textsuperscript{122} Deirdre MacPherson, \textit{The Suffragette’s Daughter: Betty Archdale: her Life of Feminism, Cricket, War and Education} (Kenthurst, 2002), 42.
\textsuperscript{123} Lyndsey Jenkins, ‘Sisters and Sisterhood: The Kenney Sisters, Suffrage and Social Reform, c.1890–1970’ (University of Oxford, 2018).
\textsuperscript{124} EB’s diary, 31 July 1910 and 14 July 1910.
\textsuperscript{125} Koven, \textit{Slumming}; Koven, \textit{Match Girl}; Peel, \textit{Miss Cutler}. 
Conclusion

Annie Kenney sincerely believed that the WSPU created and embraced opportunities for women to collaborate as equals. She claimed that ‘a Girton girl or a charwoman, it made no difference’, and ‘we exclude no class—from the rag picker to the Queen of England’. Yet, analysing her own suffragette career has revealed many of the contradictions and complexities concealed beneath this aspirational rhetoric. Initially, the WSPU sought to highlight and celebrate Kenney’s working-class background to demonstrate that theirs was an inclusive movement that could effectively represent working-class women. However, once they had made the decision to recruit wealthier supporters, these objectives were no longer so important. Instead, Kenney was repositioned as an example of the ideal suffragette, culminating in her visible displays of extreme suffering during the last phase of the militant suffrage campaign. ‘Society made Annie Kenney a worker—but God made her something better still—a creator. She was born, then, for the job of setting the working woman’s face to the dawn’, proclaimed The Suffragette in 1913, indicating her ambiguous position within the organization. She was a working-class woman but unlike other working-class women.

Annie Kenney did not passively accept these changes but rather embraced and co-operated in changing policies. She was actively self-fashioning her own image through her clothing and her actions. When presented as an idealized suffragette, she offered an inspirational example to middle-class women, but she was less effective in attracting long-term support from working-class women. Her ability to transcend the divisions of class was grounded in her exceptional commitment and sacrifice. This was not open to all women and had the effect of further distancing her from the working-class women she claimed to represent. In Annie Kenney’s representation and relationships, then, we see both the possibilities and limitations for cross-class collaboration in the WSPU.

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126 Kenney, Memories, 124; ‘Miss Kenney’s Speech,’ The Suffragette, 12 December 1913, 203.
127 ‘Annie Kenney’, The Suffragette, 24 January 1913, 221.