

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story...



It is 100 years this month since Emily Wilding Davison died in the suffragette cause at the Epsom races. Her unused return ticket is part of the Women's Library, now housed at LSE, and a moving part of the story of the women's movement. **Mary Evans** reflects on the importance of recording women's stories.



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Emily Wilding Davison lying under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby race track

On 12 March the work of the Women's Library was the focus of a seminar held at LSE. At that seminar various people who had used the Library in the past spoke of its value both to their work and in recording the history of the lives of women. Much the same thought had already occurred to Jane Austen in 1816 when her heroine Anne Elliot said, in Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story."

That comment has been at the heart of the work of the Women's Library from the moment of its foundation in 1926.

Austen's next sentence, however, has surely as much resonance for the move of the collection to LSE. It is: "Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands." This was clearly the case in 1816; in 2013 we tend to assume that the battles for access to education have – in the global north – been fought and won.

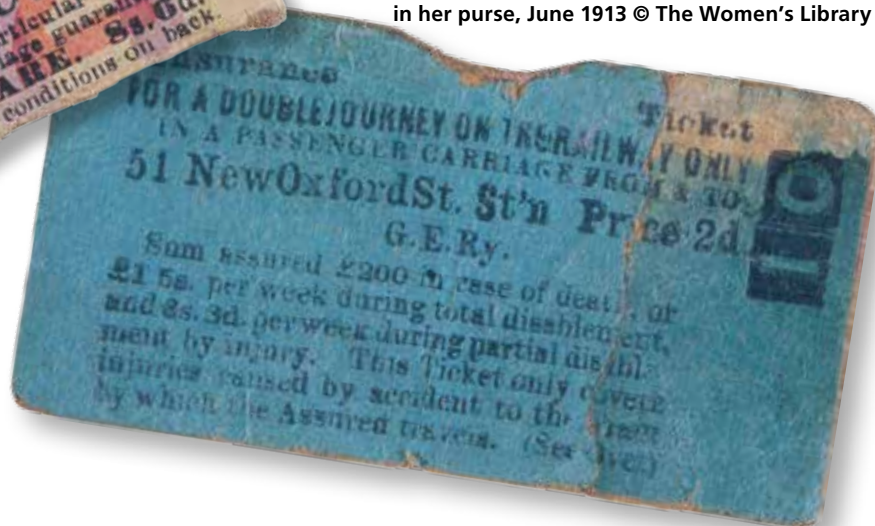
We know that there are still far too many women who are deterred from higher education by issues of cost and circumstance but those questions, we also know, are part of a public agenda. That public agenda has a history and that history is a very important part of the collections of the Women's Library.

Among the various treasures of the Women's Library now moving to LSE are the correspondence of Emily Wilding Davison and, poignantly, the return ticket to London which might have taken her home after her (fatal) protest at Epsom race track. The centenary of her death is 8 June 2013 and that occasion allows us not only to record her passionate dedication to the cause of women's suffrage but also to notice that among her papers are hate letters from the public. In 1913 Emily Davison was clearly seen, by some members of the public, as disruptive, and it is that record of the power dynamic between women and the status quo that is arguably the most significant aspect of her papers. It is very easy to tick off the (eventual) enfranchisement of women as a "job done" in Britain (and elsewhere) and assume that equitable ideas about gender were universally triumphant. What we often also take from these progress narratives of history is the smug assumption that progressive ideas need only a little encouragement to emerge and that we continue our unbroken journey towards a state of enlightened bliss. That this is not the case has been forcefully argued in Clare Hemmings's book *Why Stories Matter* and, to return again to Austen, in the articulation of the apparent mind-set of the present coalition government in the second chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*.

We shall never know how many people (male and female) were in favour of, or against, women's suffrage because that evidence is not available. But what we have considerable evidence about is that "no-one gives up power easily". In part the

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S. O. RY.
JUNE 1913.
this DAY only.
RACE COURSE to
Victoria
to particular class of
carriage guaranteed.
FARE. 8s. 6d.
See conditions on back.

Emily Wilding Davison's return train ticket from Epsom Racecourse (left), and a GER railway insurance ticket found in her purse, June 1913 © The Women's Library @ LSE



Women's Library, particularly in its holdings on suffrage campaigns, is testament to that slogan. At the same time, it also records other campaigns, of the past as well as the present: campaigns about equal pay and the making of feminist politics throughout the 20th century. What these holdings make available is, of course, documentary material that illustrates and enriches in itself but also encourages us to think again about the "truth" that we impose on history. It fits hand in glove with the campaigning collections already in the LSE Library and in some cases brings two sides of a correspondence together.

Those truths, in the case of the Women's Library collection, might include assumptions about the absolute absence of male support for suffrage or the social radicalism of feminist politics. Papers in the Library, on the other hand, show men campaigning for women's suffrage, and feminists with ideas about race and class many miles away from egalitarian ideals. In common with all the best libraries, the Women's Library challenges our preconceptions; indeed, it asks us to leave them at the door.

But we do not have preconceptions, let alone theories to test and examine, if we have not thought about gender, and gender relations, in the first place. Here LSE provides a potentially productive location

for the Women's Library collection because it is also home to the renowned Gender Institute, the largest grouping of students and staff with particular interests in gender after Rutgers University in the United States. In its home on the fifth floor of Columbia House hangs a poster with the intriguing slogan "Theory Saves Lives", a slogan that invites us to consider theories we might not like as well as theories that we do. Good or bad, "theory" in all its glorious and inglorious manifestations asks us to think about who we are and – most importantly – how we come to certain conclusions. The work done at the Gender Institute, in teaching and research, does not ask the same disruptive questions as the generation of Emily Davison but current and emergent questions about gender that are every bit as challenging as anything suggested in the early 20th century. Today's questions – about, for example, gendered relationships to neo-liberal economies, to development agendas, to violence and to perceptions of ageing – have as much potential to disturb as any of the past.

So a Women's Library comes to share a place with (among others) a Gender Institute. One title suggests "just" women, the other men and women. But the latter title could not be complete without the former, nor could the former exist had it not been for

Following Elizabeth Chapman's article on 'The Women's Library @ LSE' in the winter 2012 issue of *LSE Connect*, alumna Pippa Curtis (General Course 1986) wrote:

"What great news that the Women's Library will now be housed at LSE, so central in London and accessible to all! I was at LSE 1985-86, studying sociology and international relations, and very active in the Women's Group. I was awarded life membership of the LSE Students' Union, not least because of my co-ordinating a week of discussion, films, presentations and other events around International Women's Day in 1986. I can't think of a better place for work on women's issues to be held. Thank you Elizabeth for securing the safe future of this collection."

some initial sense, on the part of its founders, that "the story" of men was incomplete without that of women. Yet when Austen wrote her famous lines "Men have had every advantage..." I am quite sure she wrote with laughter: knowing full well that the pen was actually in her hand and that in her novels her various accounts of relations between the sexes had driven a coach and horses through the idea of male moral and intellectual superiority. After all, her heroine was not setting out a campaign programme in her remarks but finding the words to speak of her own lasting love for the hero. The energy of this fusion of private passion and public circumstance is precisely what gives us theory, what takes us to the library and what greets us there.

But there is one last sentence in the speech by Anne Elliot that is also worth remembering before we jump to secure conclusions about the gender of history: "I will not allow books to prove anything." Austen spoke as we might think of libraries, as the beginning and not the conclusion of our thinking about the world. Theories about the world are always works in progress and it is that work – and the work of those devoted librarians Vera Douie and David Doughan – that we should publicly record, and which the Women's Library collection helps us to achieve as it moves to LSE. ■

TV presenter Clare Balding and LSE's director of Library Services Elizabeth Chapman were filmed viewing materials from the Women's Library Collection for a Channel 4 programme to mark the centenary of the death of Emily Wilding Davison.

Emily Davison was the suffragette who stepped in front of King George V's horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913. She never regained consciousness and died four days later. The Collection includes her Race Card, the WSPU (Women's Social and

Political Union) flags she had pinned inside her coat, her return ticket to London, her purse, a letter from her mother to her in hospital and hate mail sent to the hospital. The documentary, *Secrets of a Suffragette*, is due to be shown on 26 May and will be available to view on 4oD from early June 2013.

The WSPU's headquarters were for some time in St Clement's, now part of the LSE campus.



Mary Evans is LSE Centennial Professor in the Gender Institute at LSE. She took part in a panel discussion on the role of women in literature, the arts and academia at LSE's fifth Space for Thought literary festival earlier this year. The event, "Women writing history", celebrated the School's acquisition of the Women's Library collection.