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The Women's Library Moves: Deeds Not Words

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Abstract

The move of The Women's Library Collection to the Library of the London School of Economics (LSE) has been a long project with a high public profile. Building academic and financial support and withstanding public protest, the collection finally moved in summer 2013. Managing building works, staffing transfers, and more, the project reveals the riches of this UNESCO-listed collection on Women's History which, combined with LSE's existing campaigning collections, makes a rich resource for students, researchers, and the public. The paper sets out some of the lessons learned in such acquisitions and reveals some of the stories in the collection, as well as plans and projects for development, publication, and discovery.

Introduction

Europe's most important collection on the history of women moved to the library of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in the summer of 2013. This paper will consider some of the challenges in moving a large library and, along the way, will be interwoven with the stories and words of women represented in the collections.

The Women's Library collection is Europe's premier resource on women's history, and the move to LSE is an ongoing project. The project has involved building LSE support and building library space. There has been a need to build political support and to withstand some public protest. A large library has moved this summer, and with the arrival of the collection and the staff who moved with it, we have recognised the power of combination. This paper will point to some lessons learned.

Campaigning Collections

The Women's Library and LSE library have both made their extensive campaigning collections open to the public. The combination of these collections provides a powerful resource for those interested in the ongoing history of campaigning. Gay Liberation in the UK began at the LSE, and we already have extensive LGBT archive collections alongside those of early political parties and other campaigns. Our intention is to make the best use

of digitization to reach the widest possible audience.

The Women's Library was previously housed in an old washhouse building in the East End of London. The LSE library with its 4 million printed items and considerable online resources and archives is housed in an old book warehouse based on the site of an historic workhouse. The Women's Library collection has some 60,000 printed books dating back to 1575, 500 private and institutional archives and 3,500 serials alongside 15,000 artefacts such as banners, badges, photographs, and other personal possessions of campaigning women. Some 60% of the pamphlets in the collection are not available via any other research libraries in the UK. Both the Women's Library and LSE collections are designated by the UK Arts Council as being of national and international significance.

The Project Begins

In March 2012, London Metropolitan University announced that they were no longer able to support the running of the Women's Library and they were looking for a new custodian. The LSE Archivist and I recognised the importance of making a case for this collection to come to LSE. We worked hard to get a bid together as did six other institutions. In late September 2012, we heard that we had been successful. From October to December 2012, we were involved with the legal issues in transferring ownership of the collection which happened at midnight on New

Year's Eve. From January to March, the collection was jointly managed at its original site and was then closed for packing and removal. In the meantime, a large new secure store was built in LSE library to receive the collection. Thirty-six trucks brought the collection from the East End to the West End of London in July.

Building a Case

Building Support at LSE was the first thing we had to do to develop the bidding process. We had to make a political case with academics and a financial case with the administration. We had to work with our human resources specialists to consider the legal transfer of staff. With estates staff, we had to make costed plans for the new accommodation required. We had to write papers for committees revising them as we went along knowing that we only had a short time, effectively five months, to get the bid together. We made a commitment to LSE to try to recoup the initial outlay of funds by fundraising. This is now well underway, and I am glad to say that LSE alumni are very enthusiastic about the project. The bid document has become a template for our work and an advertisement for our commitment.

Building a Space

To accommodate the collection, we knew we would have to build new archive space since our existing archives space is almost full. In order to do that, we had to vacate some space and extend some mobile shelves. Of course this all sounds very simple but, in fact, it is a complex piece of work that our collections manager planned brilliantly. Once the archive store was completed, we had to turn our attention to the other parts of our bid. The next stage which is already somewhat delayed is to build a new reading room on the fourth floor of our library to be called the Women's Library Reading Room. This has to be completed in time for our public opening in March 2014. After that, we are converting our current limited archives reading room into a teaching and outreach room. Here we will bring students and schoolchildren in to look at and work with original objects in the collection. We are also going to create an adjacent small museum store and finally an exhibition space at the entrance to our library. I

hope that by this time next year all construction will be complete and our bid fulfilled.

Words and Deeds

One of the most interesting items I have looked at so far in the Women's Library collection is what looks like an Oxford University Press collection of the poems of Shelley. In fact, this book owned by Katie Glidden, an artist and suffragette, was used when she was in prison to record her personal diary. There were many artists involved in the suffragette campaign which is reflected in the level of design in many of their posters, banners, and badges. Katie was arrested for breaking windows and given a prison sentence in Holloway of 2 months with hard labour. She smuggled the book of poems into prison and apparently sewed some pencils into the collar of her coat since she was not allowed artist's materials. The diary runs from the back of the book and fills up every available margin. With an artist's eye she records the sky that she can see from her cell both during the day and at night. She records her thoughts, her commitment to the cause, and her concern for other suffragette prisoners including Emily Wilding Davison, whom I shall describe later in this paper and whom she sees on a separate prison landing. As Katie writes at one point, "if anyone discovers this book and pencil I shall die of sorrow. It is funny that there should be so much to say when nothing is happening at all." Katie Glidden and Emily Wilding Davison both sent formal, optimistic letters to their mothers implying that all was well in prison. In fact, truthful letters had to be smuggled out. Katie even used a false name, perhaps to avoid hurting her family. Katie says in one letter written on a prison form: "Dearest mother I am so well. This life interests me so much. The people are just as nice as you can imagine people who go to prison for love of humanity would be."

On pages in the poetry book where there is more space, Katie drew pictures of her cell and of the roofs that she could see near the prison. Like Emily, she wanted to publish her work, and the Women's Library collection includes a revision of the diary which she obviously hoped would be published. Katie went on to be a successful artist and teacher and in her later years in retirement

was interviewed, aged 82, in a local newspaper vividly castigating young women for not voting given what the suffragettes had suffered on their behalf.

The Politics of the Move

Campaigning collections are all about politics, and as we got our bid together we realised how much political work we had to do. There is a separate charity called the Friends of the Women's Library, and we wanted to ensure that they understood how we intended to look after the collection to which they are so committed. There are many separate depositors to the collection who were naturally concerned about its future. Our professional library and archive associations needed to be kept informed. Public and private funders of the collection also needed to know about our good intentions. We, for our part, wanted to be assured that they would continue to support the collection. To that end, as soon as we knew we were successful in our bid, fundraising began in earnest, and we are working hard at it now.

I think what we did not realise but should have guessed was how many people would object to the collection moving from its building. We did consider using the building, but, after discussion with our estates colleagues, we agreed that putting the two extensive collections together in one building would greatly enhance resources for researchers, increase public access, and, at the same time, economise on staffing and infrastructure needs. There was a considerable online campaign against the collection moving, and once it was known that we were the successful bidders the attention was turned against LSE. The campaign managed to attract the attention of several members of Parliament and other public figures. Much of our time had to be spent explaining exactly what we did intend to do and how we intended to look after the collection and build it for the future. In March 2013 just before the collection closed, the Women's Library building was occupied by the Occupy Movement. This was a very difficult situation for the staff, and it was clear that most of those who moved in overnight had no real concern for the collections themselves.

Political Support for Women

LSE library holds the archives and papers of its founders, and George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, was one of them. Less well known is the fact that Shaw was an enthusiastic photographer, and we have digitised his many photographs. He was also a great supporter of the cause of votes for women, and there are several photographs in his collection showing London suffrage marches and demonstrations. Putting these photographs alongside the Women's Library collection enhances both resources.

Women's Lives—Prostitution

George Bernard Shaw was someone who cared deeply about the precarious situation of prostitutes. Katie Glidden mentions them sympathetically in her prison diary too. Josephine Butler, however, committed her adult life to campaigning for women in the sex trade and to changing legislation which focussed on prostitutes, not their sexual partners. The Josephine Butler society still exists, and some of her personal papers and their collection of books is part of the Women's Library collection.

As Josephine said, "economics lie at the root of practical morality." Josephine's overtly feminist stance in the 1870s was curious for the public but critical as a foundation for the development of future campaigns. She called on local branches of her organisation to "organise meetings and otherwise agitate." Her public pronouncements seem full of confidence, but her private letters to her sister show the toll the campaign took on Josephine. She wrote, "we are being beaten—steadily, awfully, swiftly beaten." It took Josephine 17 long years to get the result she wanted and a change in legislation. It took until 2009, nearly 100 years after her death, for the UK government to remove the term "common prostitute."

Women's Lives—Poverty

In the late nineteenth century, the philanthropist Charles Booth set out to disprove official figures on poverty. He surveyed London with a team of researchers accompanied by police officers. The resulting maps and notebooks already at LSE are

not women's history, as such, but contain much information on their working lives and living conditions. The record of conversations brings out the personal views of women at that time. Here is the voice of Mrs. Bunton who sews fur capes:

She works every day from 9 to 8 and sometimes they would like them to work till later. She takes the train one way and walks back. Her usual luncheon is bread and cheese. Last night she fainted from weakness on getting back from work... She has had seven children, one dead. Three daughters married one of whom keeps her youngest girl of 11.... Her husband was in New Zealand and she was going out to him when she suddenly heard of his death.... Says she thinks her work is better now than when she used to buttonhole one dozen men's shirts for 3 ½ pence.

The notebooks are available online, and the maps have been put onto a web site where you can compare nineteenth-century poverty data with contemporary government data. LSE library has developed this with the LSE Geography and Environment Department whose students have tested the opportunity to locate data wherever they are in London.

Women's Lives—Early Campaigns for the Vote

The campaign for votes for women began well before the suffragettes. In the Women's Library Collection, we have a letter from an artist called Barbara Bodichon from May 9, 1866. The context is discussion in Parliament on the second reform bill with wide debate about extension of the franchise to more men. Barbara wants to get a petition together and asks for Helen's backing and that of her stepfather John Stuart Mill, a Member of Parliament and supporter of women's rights.

She says, "my dear Madam I am very anxious to have some conversation with you about the possibility of doing something immediately towards getting women votes. I should not like to start a petition or make any movement without knowing what you and Mr. J. S. Mill thought

expedient at this time.... I myself should propose to try simply for what we were most likely to get." The reply from Helen Taylor written on the same day is already in the LSE as part of the Independent Labour Party collection. Helen writes, "...It is very desirable that women who wish for political enfranchisement should say so and that not women's saying so would be used against them in the future and delay the time of their enfranchisement."

The petition did go to Parliament with 1,500 signatures but sadly neither woman lived to see votes for women granted. Bringing this correspondence together in one place is a wonderful resource for researchers.

The Golden Thread (or Purple, Green, and White)

This year, 2013, marks the centenary of the death of Emily Wilding Davison, a militant suffragette fighting for votes for women who stepped out in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby to make a dramatic protest. The collision left Emily unconscious for 4 days until her death, but the resonance of her protest lives on in her personal papers and possessions in the Women's Library collection. The suffragettes were aware they should keep a record of their struggle, and several of their documents are now listed on the UNESCO World Memory Register. One of their mottos for the militant campaign was "deeds not words." In fact, Emily was very interested in words and wanted to be a writer, having taken and passed an English degree in Oxford, but being unable to graduate as this was not possible for women at that time. During the time of the move of the collection to LSE an online exhibition on Emily showed some of her writing.

There is a golden thread running through these campaigning collections. When Emily Wilding Davison died, her friend Mary Leigh took one of the purple white and green suffragette flags Emily had put under her coat. Mary later took it on the first British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) protest march. The records of CND are held in LSE Archives and Special Collections. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) flag which Emily had picked up before the Derby was

given to the Women's Library along with Emily's personal papers. The direct descendants of the CND protesters were those women who camped outside the U.S. airbase at Greenham Common in the UK in the 1980s. The Women's Library collection contains clothes worn by these protesters which show, attached to them, the colours of the suffragettes.

Lessons Learned

What have we learned from this lengthy project? We have learned that the Women's Library collection is a much greater resource than we knew. We have learned that combining it with our existing LSE collection is already enhancing capabilities. We have created a timeline of Women's History and digitised several books in their entirety to show this. We have learned that the Women's Library collection is more political than we imagined. We have learned that not enough people knew about the collections LSE already had. We have learned how to make a strong case and where our allies are. If we did not know already, we have learned that building projects always hit difficulties. We have found

colleagues with unknown reserves of energy, enthusiasm, courage and conviction.

Deeds Not Words

As LSE works to make continued public and digital access to their now greatly enhanced archives and special collections, we should be mindful of the words of Anne Elliott in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher degree; the pen has been in their hands" (1818). Katie Glidden's hard labour was sewing, and she recorded in her prison diary how badly she did it on purpose. But we know that she was good at sewing because she effectively hid her pencils by sewing them into the collar of her coat. We owe it to all campaigning women, and to the men who supported them, to continue to collect the personal and institutional stories which make up our history. Digitisation provides us with a wonderful way to get these collections out to the world. Our persistence in this project is, we hope, a true compliment to those who believed in "Deeds not Words" and whose very considerable legacy we uphold.

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Appendix: Library Archive Collections

Interview with Katie Gliddon by Kathleen Richards *Worthing Times*, 1965 (n.d.).

Man and cameraman: the photographs of George Bernard Shaw

The Man and Cameraman project carried out the cleaning, conservation, repackaging, and cataloguing of around 20,000 images and digitised over 12,000 images from G. B. Shaw's photographic collection, dating from the late 1890s to the 1940s. The material types include nitrate negatives, acetate and 35mm negatives, and photographic prints including platinum prints and other processes. The project was funded by the LSE Centennial and Annual funds, and carried out in partnership between LSE (who cares for the collection), the National Trust (who owns the collection), and the Society of Authors (who holds Shaw's copyright). Work on the conservation and cataloguing is complete and work is underway to make the digitised images available online through LSE Digital Library under a Creative Commons licence (as agreed with the Society of Authors).