

## **Woman's Hour at the Women's Library**

I've just had the wonderful privilege of producing a whole programme on women's suffrage for Woman's Hour, as part of the celebrations surrounding the opening of the new Women's Library.

I've been a producer on Woman's Hour since 1993, and over the years, have had the chance to indulge my passion for women's history. In the beginning, I was given permission to produce "little" pieces, for example an early triumph (i.e. persuading my editor to allow a piece on someone she'd never heard of) was making a feature about Elizabeth Stirling, the first woman to pass the Oxford Bachelor of Music exams in 1856 – though of course she couldn't qualify for a degree. As my experience and confidence increased, I was able to flood the programme with more and more history – Lady Charlotte Guest; the first women gardeners at Kew; 300 years of women's magazines; Queen Ethelfled; Byron's Women; medieval girlhood; the significance of the Sex (Disqualification) Removal Act.... Hundreds of things. And "specials" – a whole programme on Eleanor Rathbone; a "Pink Plaque Guide to Britain" on local women's history; our VE Day programme, recorded as if it were May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945; The Four Mary's – comparing Mary Wollstonecraft, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Mary Queen of Scots and Mary Braddon. I've loved it all. (and I hope the listeners have too....)

The women's suffrage programme has been a real high point of my career at Woman's Hour and is the culmination of several dreams. I've had a passion for women's history since taking evening classes in the subject at the WEA when I was in my early twenties – after having completed a history degree at Liverpool University. I first discovered the Fawcett Library when I was doing the research for my book "Women's London" in 1986. As with most people, it became an inspiration to me – and provided much of the material for my book "Firsts: British Women Achievers" (published by the Women's Press in 1990 and recently revised and re-issued.) My first ever Woman's Hour piece was about the library, when I was a naïve reporter. (My second, incidentally, was about the campaign to save the Millicent Fawcett Hall.)

Woman's Hour was there to cover the re-opening of the library after the famous flood in 1996 and of course made sure we were the first on Radio Four to announce the winning of the Heritage Lottery funding in 1998. That was when I made the bold promise that Woman's Hour would be coming live from the new building on its opening day.

Over the intervening years, it was up to me to gently remind the powers that be of my plan, and to make sure that the Library still wanted us. Of course, there was no guarantee that I would still be working on the programme – I've had a few "escapes" from Woman's Hour, to have another baby, to make a Radio Three series; to produce features for Radio Four. And the opening date has moved a few times too.

The idea for a whole programme on women's suffrage came just before Christmas, following an often repeated conversation I'd had with Jenni Murray, which would come up every time we worked on an item about the getting of the vote: who did more, the

suffragists or the suffragettes. Jenni is also fascinated by the subject, and very knowledgeable, and suddenly the Women's Library venue became the ideal opportunity. I e-mailed many of the suffrage historians I knew, to see what they thought of the idea and whether they'd be prepared/free to come to London and I had a fantastic response. It was then a matter of trying to work out how best to cover the subject in forty-five minutes – bearing in mind that most of our audience would only know the barest details. They would have heard of Emmeline Pankhurst, probably Emily Wilding Davison and would know that the suffragettes used to chain themselves to the railings, but not much more. Very few, for example, would know anything about the four decades of women striving for the vote before the suffragettes burst on the scene.

I had a reasonable knowledge of the subject already, supplemented by madly reading as many books as I could, and I quickly realized that it was nowhere near as black and white as one group being more important than the other. What about all the other suffrage organizations? What about class? What about the movement in the regions? What about men? What about the United Suffragists? What about the leadership? Could you call the militants after 1912 “terrorists”? So many questions to answer. My first idea was to have a round-table discussion with all the top experts, but then I realized it might be too confusing for the listener. This meant some awkward phone calls as I “uninvited” guests – not a fun job. I narrowed my panel down to four. June Purvis, Angela John, Krista Cowman and Elizabeth Crawford, who I felt all represented different areas of suffrage expertise.

The other key ingredients were readings from the period – this was clinched when Fiona Shaw agreed to perform them for us. I also had the idea to stage an “incident” in the middle of the programme, some heckling, which would have been a common experience at most suffrage meetings. Rachel Atkins, an actor who I've often used on the programme, agreed to shout “No Votes for Women” and to read a genuine anti-suffrage tirade. This was all a bit scary, as we couldn't really rehearse, but she was keen to give it her best on the day. (We also had to warn the continuity people at Radio Four, in case they thought it was a genuine heckler and took the programme off the air.)

Other ingredients in the making of the programme were working with the Outside Broadcast crew, there the ones who set up all the phone lines and do all the technical stuff, fortunately all very experienced. Working with Antonia Byatt and the Library staff themselves, all incredibly helpful. Organising the audience – this was mostly people who were connected with making the Women's Library happen. Seeing the space, in this case the Clore Seminar room, to make sure the plans were plausible. Having endless conversations with my guests, to make sure they were happy with what they'd be talking about, and that they knew where and when to come. Writing the script and working out the best questions and then taking a big pen and cutting everything down by half, because you always want to cram in more than there's time for. This is possibly the hardest bit, as favourite readings (for example, one about William Ball's hunger strike in 1912) had to bite the dust. I always take advice on this, and ask other team members to read what I've written to make sure it makes sense to someone who has distance from the programme

itself. Writing background notes for Jenni – although as she already knew so much, this was fairly easy. Briefing her about it all the day before.

The morning itself was very atmospheric. There had already been a lot of press coverage about the library, so there was a lot of excitement. It also looked fantastic – with the displays of suffrage banners and suffrage memorabilia, including Emily Wilding Davison's purse and the return half of her ticket to the Epsom Derby. With a live programme, you never know quite what's going to happen. Will the guests turn up (might their train get stuck, might they get flu); will the line to Broadcasting House work; might someone get an attack of nerves. But once you're on air, all this becomes irrelevant as the programme gets a life of its own. I have to say that all my guests performed brilliantly.

We started off by talking about the early suffragist movement and the role of Millicent Garrett Fawcett followed by a description of the early WSPU. We then went on to discuss the way the movement promoted itself, the range of suffrage organizations (David Doughan in the audience spoke about this), how widespread they were, how it was not just a middle class movement – how working class women have not left the same archive and records. June Hanham, again in the audience, told us about the importance of the Blathwayt diaries. It was when we were discussing the role of men, that our heckler burst in, and made most of the audience jump out of their skin (they had been warned at the beginning that there was a surprise in the middle, but Rachel Atkins was so loud and angry. There was spontaneous heckling back before Jenni Murray suggested she be escorted from the room. The final part of the programme was about the tactics used from around 1909, and how successful they were. Fiona Shaw ended with a moving reading from Evelyn Sharp about how she felt on the day that the royal assent was given to the Representation of the People Act in 1918.

There were disappointments – so far I've been told off for not mentioning Sylvia Pankhurst, for not mentioning the Women's Pilgrimage of 1913, for giving the suffragists too hard a time. But the overwhelming reaction has been positive. Countless people want to visit the Library and many thousands of listeners hopefully know far more now about women's suffrage than they ever imagined.