

INTRODUCTION

I believe that at the very end of your life, the remembrance of the part that you have played in this struggle will add a new value and a new significance to your life. ... nothing that other people can feel or say is to be compared with the consciousness in one's own heart of having done well. (Emmeline Pethick Lawrence to Kitty Marion, 11 November 1909)

An 'unsung Amazon'

'Kitty Marion' was born Katherine Marie Schäfer (sometimes Schafer) on 12 March 1871 in Rietberg, Westphalia, in Germany, some two months after the creation of the German Empire. Her family were part of an established, educated middle class. When she was 15, she travelled to England to escape from her engineer father, 'a strict disciplinarian with a fierce, violent, evidently uncontrollable temper' (Kitty Marion Autobiography, KMA: 17). She appears not to have seen him again. For a number of years she lived in an 'Eastern suburb of London on the way to Epping Forest' with her paternal aunt, Dora, and her five cousins (KMA: 35), before embarking on the theatrical career she had always wanted to pursue but which her father had vehemently opposed. Katherine Marie became 'Mlle Kitty' when she first appeared on the music hall stage in 1889, presumably playing up her 'foreignness' (KMA: 42); then she seems to have lived and performed as 'Kitty Raynor' between 1891 and March/April 1892, before settling on the name 'Kitty Marion' (KMA: 51).¹ During her extreme militant period with the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), and into the war years, she appeared under yet another pseudonym, 'Kathleen Meredith' (KMA: 202). Her assumption of British identity was, however, total. She lost her German citizenship in 1901 (KMA: 85-6) because she hadn't returned to her homeland after 1886. Even a suspicious Scotland Yard and Home Office conceded that 'Miss Marion is to all intents and purposes an Englishwoman [and] does not maintain any connection with Germany'. They reported that her 'sentiments appear to be pro-British', the proof being that she had 'been singing patriotic songs at recruiting meetings' (The National Archives, TNA: HO144/1721/221874) after the cessation of suffragette activities at the beginning of the First World War. In 1915 she left England for the United States to avoid the limitations imposed on her by the Aliens Restriction Act (1914) and threatened deportation to Germany. It was as Kitty Marion that she became a US citizen in 1922.²

¹ There is some confusion over the date when she changed to 'Kitty Marion'. See KMA: 51, footnotes 26-7.

² For details of issues arising from KM's citizenship status, see Appendix III.

Although born into a middle-class family, from the age of 17 Marion earned her own living and throughout her life she remained an independent, working woman. Her theatre work brought her into contact with other economically vulnerable women and families – fellow performers, landladies and ‘ordinary’ women across the country. She spent some twenty-four years working in theatre and music hall. Never a star, she achieved a measure of success and regular employment in provincial musical comedy and pantomime before falling foul of the gendered hierarchies in the theatre, after which she was forced into much less stable employment on the music hall stage.³ She became a feminist campaigner within the theatre industry, and then in the militant suffrage movements in Britain and the United States. For over ten years she sold the *Birth Control Review* on ‘every street corner from Macy’s to the Grand Central Station’ in New York (Sanger, 1938/2004: 257). In the 1930s she had a number of jobs, including with the Women’s Peace Society, the Works Progress Association and Federal Theatre Project. She built and sustained an international network of women friends – mostly fellow activists in different branches of the women’s movement – throughout her life. She died, a US citizen, in the Margaret Sanger Nursing Home just off Central Park, New York, on 9 October 1944. She was described in the press as a ‘delightful’ and ‘charming’ comedienne and ‘vivacious vocalist’; by Scotland Yard as the ‘well-known dangerous suffragette’; and as ‘a perfect brute – of a woman’, and possible spy, by the fellow actress who ‘shopped’ her to the Home Office.⁴ For those at her memorial celebration in New York she was a heroic ‘Amazon unsung’. Yet her remarkable life story, like those of many other feminist activists and modestly successful theatre performers of this era, is now largely unknown.⁵

‘Why don’t you write the story of your life?’

Kitty Marion’s autobiography falls broadly into four parts: her early family life in Germany, her move to England and theatrical career, her involvement in the suffrage movement and, finally, her work in the women’s suffrage and birth control movements in America. She began writing her memoir in the 1930s – at the suggestion of friends, according to her opening chapter; however, she may have had other reasons. In 1930 she lost her income from selling the *Birth Control Review* in New York and thereafter she struggled financially, despite help from friends. By 1936 she was ‘living alone in a single furnished room on the second floor of an old brownstone’ in the Flat Iron district of Manhattan. She appears to have started the autobiography as early as 1930, on her return to the United States from a visit to England for the unveiling of the memorial to Mrs Pankhurst, when

³ See Gardner (2005).

⁴ See Appendix III.

⁵ Kitty Marion has merited a short *Dictionary of National Biography* entry, entries in most major suffrage reference books and in some studies of women in the theatre of the time, but, until 2018, no full-length study. See Select bibliography.

‘[l]onesome for a cause to fight for ... [and having] worn out her shoes looking for a job to no avail, she paid rent for a week and set about writing down her stormy ... memoirs’ (Unidentified cutting, Kitty Marion Papers, KMP: III/2). Another motive was almost certainly more personal. By the 1920s the theatre memoir was a commonplace, but it was rarely that of a performer who was not a West End or Broadway name, nor were there accounts of the battles women had fought within the industry for better conditions. By 1930 the suffrage memoir was also familiar. Many of the key suffragette players had already published their stories – Emmeline Pankhurst and Constance Lytton as early as 1914, Annie Kenney in 1924, Sylvia Pankhurst in 1931 – and suffragist Ray Strachey’s history of the women’s movement, *The Cause*, had appeared in 1928. Kitty Marion may have wanted to reclaim the place she had held between 1912 and 1914 as a suffrage ‘celebrity’.

All the accounts of Marion testify to her gregariousness and how she ‘would often regale [her friends] with yarns of her experience in England’ (Kitty Marion’s memorial, 1944, KMP: III/2); but the main sources for the autobiography seems to have been not only her prodigious memory but a collection of scrapbooks, which she kept from around 1900, containing theatrical playbills, cuttings (latterly using a cuttings service), speeches, articles and other memorabilia. She told the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* ‘I’m going to write the story of my life ... It won’t take long because I’ve got most of the newspaper clippings that cover the high spots. They’re filed away in ... my “scrap” book’ (11 February 1930: 3, KMP: III/2). Marion was also an enthusiastic and tireless correspondent, both personal – in some cases maintaining contacts throughout her life – and public. She wrote letters to the newspapers from her early days of campaigning against abuses in the theatre until shortly before her death. Further evidence of the sources for her memoir comes from the autobiography itself, when she tells how, in New York in 1918, she ‘filled a cabin trunk with old copies of “Votes for Women”, and “The Suffragette”, theatrical and other clippings and letters, old and up to date’ for perusal by ‘Mr Finch of the U.S. Department of Investigation’, who was looking into charges that Marion was a German spy (KMA: Ch. 64–5). There have been rumours of diaries, but none has been found at the time of writing. When she was working for the Birth Control International Information Centre office (BCIIC) in London in 1930, she reports that she started keeping a diary ‘in which daily activities were recorded’, copying the BCIIC office practice (KMA: 259). This is possibly the diary mentioned, along with her ‘many books, photographs and papers’, in the report of her ‘Farewell Gathering’ held on 8 November 1944, where “Kitty spoke” from her interesting Diary kept over a period of years⁶ – recalling days in England, hunger strike, forced feeding – and Days in American – jails – cold winter nights on Fifth Ave and 42nd St. selling the Birth Control Review – suffrage days in America – choice remarks from passersby [sic] Policemen Clergy – Catholic Jew and Protestant – Atheist WPA [Works Progress Association] days of teaching

⁶ The ‘diary’ was obviously read at KM’s memorial. The use of ‘Kitty spoke’ suggests that a sense of ‘presence’ was evoked by the reading.

speech etc. etc.’ (Kitty Marion’s memorial, 1944, KMP: III/2). However, apart from the reference to the WPA work, all of this is in the autobiography, so it is difficult to know whether it was the post-1930 diary or the autobiography itself. There is also an earlier reference to a ‘diary’ in *The Suffragette* on Marion’s release from Holloway Prison in 1914. The WSPU paper reproduced passages (24 April 1914: 33) but these are, on closer examination, verbatim extracts from letters which Marion had exchanged with her fellow WSPU prisoner and hunger-striker ‘RP’, written on prison toilet paper. Marion asked RP to send the letters on to another prisoner, ‘MR’,⁷ but to make sure that they were returned to her (Museum of London Suffragette Collections, MLSC: 2003.46/5). She later appears to have used this account of her prison experience in the autobiography (KMA: Ch. LIII).

Clearly, Kitty Marion ‘carried her life with her’, and it is these papers which she used in writing her memoir. There are interesting omissions in her narrative, some of which are suggested by the remaining scrapbooks or can be found in contemporary newspapers. She was an active member of the Actors’ Association, the Actors’ Union and the Variety Artist[e]s’ Federation, campaigning not only for better treatment of all performers, challenging restrictions on women’s and children’s work in theatre, but also for an end to theatre censorship. Only a little of this makes itself into the autobiography, shaped as it is by the feminist agenda which dominated her life. Most notable is the absence of detailed reference to all but one of her acts of arson. She tells how, when the militants’ tactic changed from ‘protests with the intention of being arrested and sent to prison’ and Christabel Pankhurst issued an edict to ‘do all damage without being caught’, she undertook ‘four successful fires and escapes [before] something went wrong’ with her fifth, Hurst Park Race Course grandstand (8 June 1913, KMA: 170). Cuttings in one of the Museum of London scrapbooks relate to arson attacks on Saunderton and Croxley Green railway stations (both 10 March 1913), Shepton Mallet station (14 March 1913), a fire on a train at Teddington (26 April 1913) and ‘Levetleigh’, a vacant house belonging to Edward Du Cros, MP at St Leonards (15 April 1913). This suggests that she and her co-arsonist, Clara Giveen, were responsible for at least some of these attacks. Papers relating to ‘Levetleigh’ were also found in their belongings when the two women were arrested following the Hurst Park fire. After her subsequent imprisonment and then release under the ‘Cat and Mouse’ Act, Marion ‘visited friends in Bristol whom [she] helped to “communicate with the Government”’,⁸ after which [she] went to Liverpool ... having the most interesting, busy time’, almost certainly undertaking the destruction of an abandoned asylum, Seafeld House in West Derby, Liverpool (23 September 1913), and Sefton Park Palm House (15 November 1913), about which she also kept cuttings. There are letters from known WSPU members, part of her support network in Bristol

⁷ RP was ‘Rachel Peace’, the alias used by Florence Jane Short (1881–?); MR was Mary Richardson (1883?–1961).

⁸ Possibly a reference to the destruction of the university boat house on the night of 22 October, or the municipal boathouse on 24 November.

and Liverpool, addressed to 'Auntie Maggie', congratulating her on her release from Holloway in 1914 (MLSC: 50.82/1122). Marion also 'paid short visits to Manchester' (KMA: 184), where the cactus house at Alexandra Park was bombed on the night of 11 November 1913,⁹ and Leeds to leave a message for Asquith in the form of a smashed window (23 December 1913).

Kitty Marion recounts the Hurst Park attack in the autobiography with great verve, but in 1934 she chose to not to write about these other activities, although she did not preclude the possibility of leaving 'written details to posterity' at some time in the future (KMA: 184). This was almost certainly not squeamishness about past misdemeanours, nor misplaced self-censorship, but pragmatism. In 1930, fellow WSPU member Edith Mansell-Moullin, in a letter to Edith How-Martyn, also expressed her reservations about mentioning bombs in her tribute to Emily Wilding Davison (18 March 1930, MLSC: 61.218/2/B), and How-Martyn herself wrote in answer to a question from Marion, presumably about the inclusion of detail about militant activity in the autobiography, that, 'As far as I am concerned the Suffragette Fellowship records will be kept for posterity and nothing eliminated but anything published while people are alive may have to be notified,' suggesting that they were all exercising some caution about putting things into the public domain (29 January 1936, KMP: II/1). As late as March 1960, militant Lilian Lenton, in an interview for the BBC, declined to mention her first arson attack because she hadn't been caught for it (MLSC: 61.218/2/B). Since there had been no amnesty for criminal activity by the suffragettes¹⁰ – indeed residual hostility to the militants began to re-emerge in the 1930s, and there is no statute of limitation in United Kingdom law for criminal offences – the arsonists were still liable to prosecution. In 1915 Scotland Yard wrote to the Home Office that there were 'two years and 256 days of [Marion's] sentence unexpired' (30 August 1915, TNA: HO144/1721/221874), and this was still true in 1930. (Marion was allowed back into England on a temporary visa in 1922 and 1925, although by 1925 she was an American citizen. Her last visit to England was in 1930 for the unveiling of Mrs Pankhurst's statue.¹¹) Another consideration was that other WSPU members would have been implicated in any 'confession' of bombings and arson attacks, so the women's caution was both judicious and sisterly. On a personal level, Marion

⁹ Further 'evidence' comes in the poem read at KM's memorial in 1944: 'Sometimes you'd set out with baby's carriage/Containing no after effects of marriage/Reposing there, unblest by judge or parson, /Were little things for some big well-placed arson/Paper and rags, some sticks and oil were there/To blaze a pathway with its wondrous glare/Through empty mansion, grandstand, or pier/Straight to the ballot box. O Pioneer!' (KMP: III/2). The pier may have been Great Yarmouth Pier, destroyed on 17 April 1914, although this attack was attributed to Hilda Burkett and Florence Tunks (see KMA: 195).

¹⁰ At the outbreak of war, there was a suggestion that the WSPU should march on the Home Office demanding an amnesty for 'the mice', and KM was one of those who was 'quite willing to go if there had been the slightest chance of gaining anything, but there wasn't' (MLSC: KM to Claire Callendar, 14 August 1914). See Cowman (2007): 180–1.

¹¹ See Appendix III.

may have intended another visit to England, even returning to live there, and certainly had hopes of publishing her autobiography there, all of which would have been jeopardised by any revelation of unpunished criminal activity.

'Nobody here seems to want to publish ...'

In writing the story of her life in the 1930s, Marion records events and her experience. She does not write about, for example, the relationships she formed in prison,¹² nor, in any detail, about her two 'disappearances' from New York, in 1916 and 1920, both of which were reported in the newspapers as possible suicides, and about other periods of depression which she alludes to in her first chapter and in letters to friends in the 1930s. Although she had kept in touch with many theatrical and suffrage friends after her move to America, the leaders seem to have dropped her. She had been something of a star at the height of suffragette militancy for her imprisonments and heroic struggles for the cause. When she was released from prison she was showered with letters praising her actions, and was described by Josephine Gunne as 'a splendid card to play!!' at WSPU drawing-room meetings, and she was asked to share her experience of force feeding by a lady 'of sufficient importance' who turned out to be Mollie, Countess Russell (MLSC: 50.82/1122). However, Mrs Pankhurst and Nurse Pine 'cut' her when they visited New York in 1919 (KMA: 255); Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel had become virulently anti-German with the advent of war and, according to a fellow militant, Mrs Pankhurst would have betrayed 'poor Kitty Marion' as a German spy to the American authorities, had she known her whereabouts (KMA: 255). Marion may also have felt 'betrayed' by Margaret Sanger, who she felt had had a chance in 1928 'to fight the [Roman Catholic] church and her reactionary board but she caved in to power and money'; as a result, the Birth Control Board 'voted the B.C.R. off the streets' (KM to Alice Park,¹³ AP, 17 July 1942, *The Women's Library*, TWL: 6.1 Box 2), and Marion lost not just her source of income but her 'work-home' and regular contact with friends. The failure of all her efforts to get the finished autobiography published undoubtedly contributed to her 'low spirits' in the 1930s, in addition to losing her 'family' in the birth control movement and her increasingly poor health and financial problems.

In 1940, Marion wrote to Alice Park that she "could a tale unfold." Of writing my life story which nobody here seems to want to publish. I don't know the right people. ... Ever so many publishers have turned it down, as not in their line or something. I am afraid it is too much of a fight against "male domination" over women in the labor market in general and the theatrical profession in particular, in England' (5 December 1940, TWL: 6.1 Box 2). Marion had finished the autobiography sometime in 1933 (adding the final chapter later), according to letters

¹² See Appendix II

¹³ Alice Locke Park (1861–1961), noted Californian feminist, suffragist and pacifist.

from Olive Johnson and Edith How-Martyn.¹⁴ It was probably hand written, although no complete copy is extant, just a few pages. She learned to type only in 1934, and her friend Olive Johnson wrote congratulating her on her ‘two fingered exercise’ and thought she would now ‘find it a boon not to write everything by hand!’ and it is possible that she made a typewritten copy herself at this point (2 February 1934, KMP: II/1). Her friends read sections of the book, and their letters are peppered with enquiries as to its progress throughout 1934. How-Martyn was ‘expecting good news of your book’ and asking ‘what has happened?’ in October (6 October 1934, KMP: II/1). After that there is silence until 1937, when Alice Green of the WSPU put Marion in touch with Austrian feminist Anna Helene Askanasy¹⁵ and her circle in Vienna. Marion ‘in the course of correspondence ... mentioned [her] script needed typing, when [she] could arrange the necessary cash’. Askanasy then ‘suggested sending a copy for her secretary, who understood English, to do’. In due course, Askanasy sent Marion three copies of the autobiography and a German translation by the German feminist-anarchist journalist Meta Kraus-Fessel,¹⁶ who, in Marion’s view, ‘must have seen something worth while in my story to devote that much time to it’. Tragically, when in March 1938 ‘Hitler went to Austria, [Frau Askanasy] escaped with her two young daughters, while her husband was arrested and killed. She fled to London where she knew the old suffrage crowd, and [eventually] settled down in British Columbia’. Marion wrote ironically, ‘This shows some of the kind of luck my “book” is having’ (KM to AP, 5 December 1940, TWL: 6.1 Box 2).

In 1942, what appears to be the top copy (now in the Women’s Library in London, recognisable by the ‘faint pencil marks over some words’) was sent to Alice Park so that she could ‘pick out what takes [her] fancy as a story’ (1 August 1942) and in December Marion expressed the wish that ‘you and I could read my manuscript together’, as ‘I need some “understanding” soul to give a helping hand on that’. She fears that, as it is, ‘it is rather crude ... just the facts stated, out of which the right editor could make a good story’. At this stage, she seems to have given up hope of getting the complete manuscript published. She planned to ‘bequeath’ the autobiography to the League for Mutual Aid in New York, as ‘they are a fine, helpful group for the “underdogs”’ (9 December 1942), but Park’s copy eventually found its way, with her letters from Marion, to London and the Women’s Service Library. Another two copies of the autobiography, with the German version, ended up in the Schwimmer-Lloyd Collection in New York Public Library. One copy, labelled ‘Kitty’s Book’, also has amendments in Marion’s hand, plus additional paragraphs stuck in, and is probably the original version. The fourth copy, now in the Museum of London, had been sent by

¹⁴ Olive Johnson (née Oliven Malmberg, 1872–1952); Edith How-Martyn (née How, 1875–1954). See KMA: 258. How-Martyn established the Suffragette Fellowship in 1926.

¹⁵ Anna Helene Askanasy (1893–1970), see Epilogue. Alice Green (n.d.), see KMA: 174

¹⁶ Meta Kraus-Fessel (1884–1940).

Marion in 1938 to a 'Miss Turner'¹⁷ in London, to read and then pass on to Alice Green so that her old suffrage friends might 'consider if it could be published over there, and if among [them they] could find a "ghost" for it to rewrite, or do some thing with it'. Marion suggested that when How-Martyn got hold of 'that script' she should keep it for her museum (10 December 1938, MLSC: 50.82/1122), the archive established in the 1920s as part of the Suffragette Fellowship.

The autobiography of Kitty Marion: actor and activist

In 1942 Kitty Marion expressed the belief that her story would probably 'be done some day'. It has taken over 75 years.

Diane Atkinson and I met over the Kitty Marion papers. Diane was then Education Officer at the Museum of London, curating its 1992–93 suffragette exhibition, 'The Purple, White and Green: Suffragettes in London 1906–1914'; I was a feminist theatre academic working on the Actresses' Franchise League. It has long been our desire to make Kitty Marion's autobiography more widely available, and thereby to make her career as a successful, if not stellar, performer and early campaigner on behalf of women in theatre better known, as well as her contribution to the militant suffrage and birth control movements. Marion's autobiography offers rich and rare insights into life as a provincial performer, and into the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's movements. She writes from 'within' and from 'below', as an activist, not an observer; one who was eventually willing to undertake acts of 'terrorism' and risk her own life through hunger striking and force feeding for the causes she believed in. In the year in which we are celebrating the centenary of the partial enfranchisement of women in Great Britain, Manchester University Press has made it possible to publish the autobiography in its entirety.

The Autobiography of Kitty Marion in the following pages is as precise a reproduction of the original typescript as is possible, taken from the copy in the Museum of London. Every effort has been made to remain faithful to Marion's text and to replicate the spelling, stylistic and typographical inconsistencies and errors. Marion uses both British and American English, and the manuscript was typed up by an Austrian, but never edited for publication. We have prepared the text with a minimum of interference, and have provided footnotes to enable the reader to place people,¹⁸ places and events without the distraction of having to find things themselves while reading.

We have provided a brief epilogue covering Marion's life after she finished the autobiography, and several additional documents to which she would not

¹⁷ Probably Minnie Turner (1867?–1948), WSPU member, who kept a suffrage lending library at her boarding-house in Brighton.

¹⁸ Theatre people are particularly difficult to identify as, like KM, they often used stage names. Where we have been unable to find any information about an individual we have not footnoted them; where there is information but no dates, we have used (n.d.).

have had access and which throw a different light on her story or fill in omissions, deliberate or otherwise, in her account. It is a regret that we cannot include some of Marion's correspondence, which gives a real sense of the woman – passionate, indefatigable, dedicated to her causes and, perhaps unexpectedly, humorous – but there isn't the space to do this. We may have missed things, even got things wrong, and new insights will no doubt come to light in the future, especially as more information comes online, but it gives us enormous delight to see Kitty Marion's story, in her own words, in print for the first time – something which she, and many of her friends, fought long and hard to achieve.

Viv Gardner
Manchester, February 2018