

Kate Sharpley's Story

Albert Meltzer

1978

One of our frequently asked questions is 'who was Kate Sharpley?' Many of our readers will know of her as 'One of the countless "unknown" members of our movement ignored by the official historians of anarchism.' We hope this tribute, written by Albert Meltzer in 1978 will help to fill that statement out a little. There are more details in Albert's autobiography *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*.

Kate's Tinwear

Sixty-five years ago Queen Mary was handing out medals in Greenwich, most of them for fallen heroes being presented to their womenfolk. One 22-year old girl, said by the local press to be under the influence of anarchist propaganda, having collected medals for her dead father, brother and boyfriend, then threw them in the Queen's face, saying, 'If you think so much of them, you can keep them.' The Queen's face was scratched and so was that of one of her attendant ladies. The police, not a little under the influence of patriotic propaganda, then grabbed the girl and beat her up. When she was released from the police station a few days later, no charges being brought, she was scarcely recognisable.

The girl was Kate Sharpley, who had been active in the Woolwich anarchist group and helped keep it going through the difficult years of World War 1. After her clash with the police she was sacked from her job 'on suspicion of dishonesty' (there was nothing missing but a policeman had called checking up on her...) and, selling libertarian pamphlets in the street, she was recognised by the police and warned that if she appeared there again she would be charged with 'soliciting as a prostitute' (which in those days would have been a calamity, and even today a disaster, if once convicted). Isolated from her family, and with the group broken up, she moved out of activity, away from the neighbourhood, and married.

I met her, by chance, last year in Lewisham. Twice widowed, she remembered the anarchist movement with nostalgia, and gave me a fascinating account of the local group in the years before World War 1. Unfortunately, she was already very ill, and a few weeks ago, she died, I was told by one of her neighbours.

I had, though, asked her for a message to the Anarchist movement today. Her answer: 'Tell the kids they're doing all right, they don't need any advice from me.' Especially she praised the

young women of today: 'I wouldn't have had to take cover like I did if women of my day had any guts' she said. But she *did* have guts. A few only in 1917 dared take any action in bereaved England.

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