

Remembering Kate Austin, Missouri anarchist & feminist

Anonymous

2024

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‘An early freethought and free love advocate, Austin was among those influenced by the legacy of the Haymarket anarchists and became a lifelong anarchist communist. [...] In 1901 in the pages of *Free Society*, Austin joined Emma Goldman in defending Leon Czolgosz’s attack on President McKinley. Austin was a contributor to *Free Society*, *Firebrand*, *Lucifer*, *the Lightbearer*, and *Discontent*. She died of consumption in Kingman, Kansas, on 28 October 1902 while traveling to Denver.’[1]

From the farm she shared with husband Sam in Missouri, Austin was an integral part of the anarchist movement and its press and took part in debates about anarchism, tactics, feminism and reproductive rights. She also wrote in the broader radical press and belonged to the American Press Writers Association, a radical group ‘who monitored newspapers for bias and wrote editorials in protest to mainstream papers across the country.’[2]

The hard work of farm life certainly gave Austin a jaundiced view of men who wanted to ‘protect’ women: ‘I’ve always noticed that the men who talk that way never feel hurt when the angel chops the wood, milks the cow, and builds the fire on a cold morning. He is not afraid of that sort of independence, but only of the kind that might question his authority.’[3]

Free Society printed several tributes after her death. James F. Morton, Jr. wrote ‘Herself a revolutionist to the core, and an intense combatant in behalf of her own resolutely uncompromising position, she never departed from the standpoint of fraternal affection for every comrade.’[4]

In a report to the Amsterdam Congress in 1907, Emma Goldman and Max Baginski declared ‘Kate Austin, now dead, was one of the most fearless rebels America ever produced. Though her entire life was spent on a distant western farm, lacking opportunities and the association of kindred spirits, Kate Austin succeeded in developing into a clear and concise thinker, fearless in her attacks upon the present system.’[5]

Austin certainly developed her own powers through self-education, having only had a little official schooling. Here’s a couple of fragments from her daughter’s account of her life to both show and question how isolated she was:

‘As a little girl it was one of my almost daily tasks to ride slow-footed Dewey, the burro, two and one-half miles distant to the post office at Caplinger Mills. I carried a bag full of letters to mail and brought back a bag full for her to read and answer. [...] And through all her days Kate Austin’s life was the hard life of the farm woman. There were her husband and the five children. And there was her busy life in the farm community among families interdependent upon one another for their pleasures no less than for help in times of sickness and trouble.’[6] It seems to me that Austin *was* connected, in all sorts of ways to all sorts of people. After her death Giuseppe Ciancabilla paid tribute to her in *Protesta Humana*, recording that she’d sent a photo of herself to ‘one of our comrades’, signed it ‘One of those who was born again Nov. 11, 1887.’[7]

A new phase of remembering Kate Austin happened in the thirties. In her 1931 memoir *Living my Life* Emma Goldman recalled visiting the Austin farm and lamented the death of ‘the most daring, courageous voice among the women of America!’[8] Austin’s friend Carl Nold wrote a tribute to her in *Man!*[9] Nold was also instrumental in gathering material for the Labadie Collection, and it’s likely that included the material by and about Austin that they hold.

Her intense activity in the anarchist and radical press (and making it into the archive) has made Austin ‘rememberable’: Back in 1996 Howard S. Miller made a valuable study of this ‘mid-western farmwife and mother of five, who wrote revolutionary propaganda at her kitchen table in the evenings after chores.’[10] In 1999 Jessica Moran wrote her thesis on *The Story of Kate Austin: Anarchist Revolutionary Writer* (unpublished). She is also one of Sheila Rowbotham’s ‘Dreamers

of a new day’.[11] A compilation of her writings has been published in French translation.[12] Now a wave of digitisation of primary sources (some undertaken by anarchist ‘shade-tree historians’[13] like Historical Seditious) means her writings are now more available than ever.

The Kate Sharpley Library has a page devoted to her at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/d7wn1c>. There’s more to read out there and probably a lot more to learn.

Notes

1, ‘Austin, Kate’ in Directory of Individuals p.509; *Emma Goldman : a Documentary History of the American Years, Volume 2: Making Speech Free* edited by Candace Falk, Barry Pateman, Jessica Moran (2005).

2, Bio of Edward W. Chamberlain, p.514 *Making Speech Free*.

3, ‘Woman’ manuscript in the Labadie Collection, printed in *Man! : an anthology of anarchist ideas, essays, poetry and commentaries* (1974) as ‘Is woman doomed by nature to be the mental inferior of man?’ First published in *Man!* vol. 2 No. 6-7 June-July 1934 with note about copying it from the Labadie Collection by ‘C.N.’ (Carl Nold) (see also <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kate-austin-woman>)

4, *Free Society*, November 30, 1902 https://historicalseditious.noblogs.org/files/2023/04/Free-Society_9-48_30-November-1902.pdf. Other tributes in this issue came from William Holmes, Voltairine de Cleyre and ‘Joy’ (Freedom Colony, Kansas).

5, ‘The situation in America’, [Anon. but Goldman and Baginski] *Mother Earth* November 1907. p.387.

6, Jennie B. Austin, ‘Kate Austin, April [193-?]’ in the Labadie Collection <https://apps.lib.umich.edu/labadie-collection>

7, G. Ciancabilla, ‘Kate Austin’ *La Protesta Humana* (November 1902) <https://archive.org/details/la-protesta-humana-vol.-1-no-7-12-1902-03/>

8, Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* vol 2 p.331. She runs her two visits of 1897 and 1899 into one.

9, Carl Nold, ‘Kate Austin’ *Man!* vol. 2 No. 6-7 June-July 1934. Text (from the *Man!* Anthology) at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/w9gk7h>

10, Howard S. Miller, ‘Kate Austin: A Feminist-Anarchist on the Farmer’s Last Frontier’. *Nature, Society and Thought*. 9 (2): (April 1996) 189–209. <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/149963>

11, Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a new day : women who invented the twentieth century* (2011)

12, *Kate Austin, paysanne anarchiste et féministe* edited and introduced by Aurélien Roulland (2019).

13, see Robert P. Helms, ‘Ross Winn in the Anarchist Universe’ In *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 41, January 2005 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/0cfz4n>

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