

## CDA-8-Holdsworth

### Songs of a Factory Girl: Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and Radical Working-Class Women's Writing

How to apply and further details: <https://www.sww-ahdtp.ac.uk/prospective-students/apply/collaborative-doctoral-award-projects-2021/>

#### Supervisors

- Dr Nicola Wilson, Associate Professor of Book and Publishing Studies (University of Reading, [n.l.wilson@reading.ac.uk](mailto:n.l.wilson@reading.ac.uk)).
- Dr Simon Rennie, Senior Lecturer in Victorian Poetry (University of Exeter, [s.rennie@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.rennie@exeter.ac.uk))
- Nick Hunt (Mid Pennine Arts, [nick@midpenninearts.org.uk](mailto:nick@midpenninearts.org.uk))

Dr Wilson is Associate Professor of Book and Publishing Studies who has led on republishing Carnie Holdsworth's work over the last decade, and Dr Rennie is Senior Lecturer in Victorian Poetry. They have both published in the field covered by this CDA and bring complementary disciplinary skills (literary/publishing history and poetry/periodical studies) to the supervision. Mr Hunt is Creative Director at Mid Pennine Arts (MPA).

Both academic supervisors have a record of supervising PhD students to completion and they have both worked with non-HEI organisations relevant to this project, including the Working-Class Movement Library, Culturapedia (Burnley Literary Festival and Spot On Library Touring Commission) and public libraries across the North West. They have excellent track records in delivering impact and public engagement, and experience in managing large funded projects (Wilson PI British Academy, 'Book Society'; Co-I Canadian SSHRC, 'Modernist Archives Publishing Project'; Rennie PI AHRC 'Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine').

The project builds on a well-established working relationship between Dr Wilson and Mr Hunt, who has extensive experience in devising original work across a broad spectrum of the arts, and in developing collaborative projects with artists, community groups and public sector partners. He has led a variety of projects supported by lottery, government and EU funding.

#### Subject

This PhD explores the radical writings and legacy of Lancashire mill-woman, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth (1886-1962), in collaboration with arts commissioning agency Mid Pennine Arts (MPA). Carnie Holdsworth was a prolific, experimental writer across a variety of genres including journalism, serial fiction, children's literature, poetry and politics. She is one of the first working-class women in England to publish a novel (*Miss Nobody*, 1913) and became renowned as a radical socialist feminist. At our current time of political polarisation and increased social and economic disparities, contemporary regional audiences are becoming

aware of Carnie Holdsworth's audacity as a writer and the challenge her works present to key paradigms of modernity. This PhD will offer the first reassessment of Carnie Holdsworth's radical literary works, publishing history, and creative impact, contributing to urgent public demand for greater access to the dynamic, diverse history of working-class writing.

### **Research questions and methods**

- What was the extent and impact of Carnie Holdsworth's experimental creative output? How did her writing for periodicals (including Robert Blatchford's *The Woman Worker*, the Co-operative's *Millgate Monthly*, and *The Cotton Factory Times*) impact her longer works of fiction and writing career?
- How does Carnie Holdsworth's writing contribute to broader understandings of popular radicalism? How was Carnie Holdsworth influenced by local interactions, rural and urban intellectual hubs, as well as East Lancashire's literary legacy?
- What effects did Carnie Holdsworth's lifestyle and precarity have on her writing and publishing career? What is the significance of place (rural and urban) and mobility in her work?
- What is the nature of current engagement and re-imagining of Carnie Holdsworth's writing for new audiences? How can local and national audiences engage with more of her work? Does her radical, polemical experimentation help re-evaluate models of working-class writing for today's audiences?

Reflecting the strengths of the supervisory team, the project adopts a mixed methodology, including archival and bibliographic research, and creative practice. Through co-supervision with MPA and their *Pendle Radicals* project, the student will engage in creative/critical practice to share knowledge and research on Carnie Holdsworth, including with local communities. Working as part of this pre-existing team, the student will have access to creative practitioners exploring Carnie Holdsworth's work (i.e. comedian/playwright Ruth Cockburn, broadside ballad singer/historian Jennifer Reid, and the East Lancashire Clarion Choir) and links to local audiences already interested in Carnie Holdsworth in Great Harwood/Oswaldtwistle (Hyndburn), Blackburn, Burnley and Pendle.

### **Research context**

Over the last decade, Carnie Holdsworth's writing has been brought back into the public domain through reprints of her key novels and the adaptation of her work by MPA and other regional creative agencies. Yet despite recovery efforts, the significant impact of Carnie Holdsworth's radical body of writing and her departure from convention is still not widely known and is hampered by the fact that her full output as a 'newspaper novelist' – writing across a disparate periodical press – has not been quantified. With support from Exeter's Digital Humanities Lab, this project aims to redress this by charting and making publicly accessible for the first time via an online database Carnie Holdsworth's extensive engagement with the co-operative, feminist, suffrage and socialist press.

The PhD will locate and examine Carnie Holdsworth's oeuvre within several dynamic areas of academic research, contributing to renewed scholarly interest in the history of working-

class writing and working-class poetry and periodical studies. It will help fill a lingering gap in critical understandings of working-class women's literary history. Crucially, it builds on efforts to recover the literary history of industrial workers in the Victorian period (e.g. two AHRC-funded projects, 'Piston, Pen & Press project' and 'Poetry of the Lancashire Cotton Famine' ), by exploring the continuing importance of newspaper poetry columns and serial fiction to an early twentieth-century 'mill-girl' writer. Sharing academic knowledge on the history of working-class writing is becoming increasingly urgent. This PhD has the potential to show how Carnie Holdsworth challenges us to think differently about key terms defining working-class writing and modernity.

The student would be part of MPA's *Pendle Radicals* (launched in 2018). This is a major, long-term project led by MPA as part of the Pendle Hill Landscape Partnership, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. *Pendle Radicals* has three objectives:

- To re-connect people to their past by researching and re-telling the stories of notable individuals connected to Pendle Hill and East Lancashire, and movements which had a major impact on our society.
- To organise and support a series of projects which celebrate these non-conformists and activists through research, walks and talks, publications, exhibitions and a wide range of creative interpretation.
- To promote pride of place and cohesion, and to raise aspirations, especially amongst young people.

### **Main resources/collections in this area**

The research will make extensive use of records in the Co-operative Archive, the Working-Class Movement Library, and the British Library (*The Woman Worker*). The periodicals Carnie Holdsworth contributed to have not been digitised and there is scope for unearthing much more of her literary output through close analysis of these publications. The open access database showcasing Carnie Holdsworth's oeuvre will help increase public access to and understanding of the rich periodical culture of which industrial artists like Carnie Holdsworth were part.

MPA is based in Burnley and serves the communities of Pennine Lancashire and the wider North West. A registered charity with a 54-year track record, it has accumulated a body of distinctive creative work recognised by national and international awards. MPA develops bespoke creative projects that blend elements of art, heritage and environment. Projects are community-based, specific to place and intended to deliver long-term positive impacts for communities and individuals.

### **Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

This project will provide distinctive opportunities for the student to develop a range of career-enhancing attributes. In particular, the student will gain: cross-disciplinary experience by working with historical, literary, and community arts experts; team-working experience, by becoming an integral part of the *Pendle Radicals* team of staff and dedicated volunteers at MPA; an understanding of impact by working closely with MPA on their

community engagement programmes; training via the academic supervisory team in Digital Humanities, with access to Reading and Exeter's Digital Humanities labs in building the online database of Carnie Holdsworth's bibliographic output; the benefits of sharing research and working with other PhDs and Early Careers Scholars in Reading's Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing.

Working alongside Hunt are an enthusiastic research group that includes Roger Smalley (Carnie Holdsworth's biographer), Janet Swan (Reading in Practice proponent and community engagement specialist who has co-led a parallel HLF funded project called "Finding Ethel"), Bob Sproule (local historian), Barbara Sanders (East Lancashire Clarion Choir), Nick Burton (registered walks leader) and Ann Cochrane (archivist/librarian for Burnley Civic Trust). The PhD candidate will be welcomed into the ongoing life of this group as an integral part of the project team; this will offer a supportive and collaborative context for the individual's research. On site or online, the individual will be offered regular access to interaction with the group as well as with MPA staff.

Access to facilities will include MPA office facilities, the project library, an online sharing group, the project blog (Rebel Pen Club), and an introduction to partners including at Pendle Hill partners' meetings. MPA has extensive experience in hosting training, education and placement opportunities at a variety of levels. The organisation is committed to providing a supportive environment for the individual, and to devising with them a programme tailored to their needs; also to encouraging the individual to lead group activity and originate creative outcomes with the appropriate level of guidance and supervision.