At a time when marking the centenary of the First World War has too often become a way to celebrate the British imperial state, Sheila Rowbotham’s play Friends of Alice Wheelon gives us a window into the lives of those who opposed the war. The play, written in the 1970s and rewritten in 2009 by Sheila Rowbotham, is a anti-war activist set up by an intelligence agent and was accused and convicted – of plotting to kill the Prime Minister, Lloyd George. Wheelon kept a second-hand clothes shop in Derby, and before the war she ad campaigning for women’s suffrage; after the war she broke out of the suffragette movement to become involved in the anti-war networks. In 1916, she was an intelligence agent, who called herself ‘Alex Gordon’ and used as a conscientious objector. After the war she pleaded for a peace by the 10,000 who claimed to have uncovered a poison plot to kill Lloyd George. Brought to trial amid the journalism and panic of the First World War. Wheelon was found guilty, guilt by many of her neighbours and died just two years later of influenza after being released early from prison.

How did you come across Alice Wheelon’s story and why did it strike such a chord with you that you wanted to write a play? I came across the book as a result of a chance encounter. It was an article in a local newspaper about how Alice Wheelon was a key figure in the suffrage movement. The story of her life and the sacrifices she made for the cause resonated deeply with me, and I felt that her story needed to be shared with a wider audience. I was also inspired by her unwavering dedication to the cause, her courage, and her relentless pursuit of justice.

example, that the shop steward leaders were not trying to lead it over people. The networks made sense to me because they were how we created women’s liberation as a movement. People in formal political organisations used to ask me ‘how did you recruit all these members?’ but we never recruited anyone in that sense. We just bumped into one another and linked up, always following everything up and ensuring we didn’t lose contact with people. Now, of course, groups are able to organise very successfully through networks and they are taken for granted.

The play looks through the keyhole into Alice Wheelon’s personal life, and by doing that we also learn about the state repression at that time, the intra-rivalries of the intelligence agencies, and the struggles between different groups to define and shape a British socialism.

I think looking through a keyhole is a great image. That’s exactly how I work as a historian. You get just a tiny bit of light on an intricate set of stories, and then doing more research you can zoom out and take in all the factors that are impinging on individual people’s lives. You start with the particular and the wider picture unfolds.

Something that you paint so vividly in the play is the different intelligence agencies competing with one another – which seemed to be so fatal for Alice Wheelon. As they tried to uncover elaborate plots in order to justify their funding and continued political support. It was amazing. Until I wrote the historical background to the play I’d written history from below, whether it was labour history or women’s history, but with this story of Alice Wheelon I found myself thrust into the history of state intelligence.

It was strange feeling as a person on the left reading the reports from the people who were sending spies round to check on the shop stewards’ movement at the time. But I was also illuminating. I realised how complicated the state is and that nothing is ever completely preordained. There was not a unified plan to pursue this trial, but a convergence of political and personal factors. Individuals were competing to do their allegiance to the state. I had been working through the intellectual tensions between rival intelligence agencies, vying for power and resources.

It was convenient to exaggerate the threat in order to justify the work of the intelligence agencies. Exactly, and the Alice Wheelon case presented a justification for one particular unit.

The play also touches on the struggles for women’s liberation within these rivalries – the socialists, syndicalists, liberals, fascists, communists and militant trade unions. The intelligence agencies couldn’t understand that these networks were based on friendships and solidarity: they were always looking more for intricate conspiracies that just weren’t there. Accustomed to hierarchies, they found it incomprehensible, for received when the play was performed in the 1980s. Jesse is a fictional character based on historical knowledge. She became the socialist-feminist voice in the play, demanding a politics grounded in daily actualities. The incident in which she tells Arthur MacManus he should miss a meeting to look after Alice Wheelon’s daughter Hettie is an invention, though again the power disparities between men and women were real enough. In fact, Hettie’s affair with Arthur MacManus occurred later.

I was making a political point really. It caused shock horror at the time. It really divided audiences. After the play some were saying, ‘He shouldn’t have missed a meeting!’ But in the women’s movement we really challenged this professional revolutionary vision among activists who would cut themselves off from all other responsibilities and personal life. That was partly how we came to the slogan ‘the personal is political.’

Do you think the surveillance culture that entrapped Alice Wheelon is as relevant for political movements today? It is a real dilemma - to be open to new people while being wary of police spying. But there is nothing worse as a newcomer that wants to get involved than being viewed with suspicion. Perhaps Alice Wheelon should have followed Hettie’s example and suspected the agent. Alex Gordon, though she was not the only one - he had deceived MacManus, who gave him a letter. But I don’t think viewing everyone with suspicion is the answer. And of course groups like the Communist Party that were not so open also later got surveilled. If you get too paranoid you get consumed by it and it is damaging for all of us involved in left politics.

Can you tell me a little bit about the ongoing campaign to clear Alice Wheelon’s name? There has been more interest over the years in the case. She has been mentioned in books and articles and since my play at least two other plays have been written. Alice Wheelon also has a poem and a poster in her honour. In Derby the local People’s History group campaigned and the council and the Civic Society put up a plaque about her. Her descendants, Chloe and Deirdre Mason, have also been involved in a vast amount of evidence to present to the Criminal Cases Review Board.

Are there any plans for the play to be performed again? Not that I know of, but it would be great if it were. It helps more people hear about this miscarriage of justice and demand that the state admits the wrong that was done then and I will be happy. I hope that it will be relevant to a new generation of activists thinking about how to organise against austerity and the surveillance of left groups.