

Trouble and Strife

No. 2

a radical feminist magazine £1.50

*Witches —
martyrs, rebels or victims?*

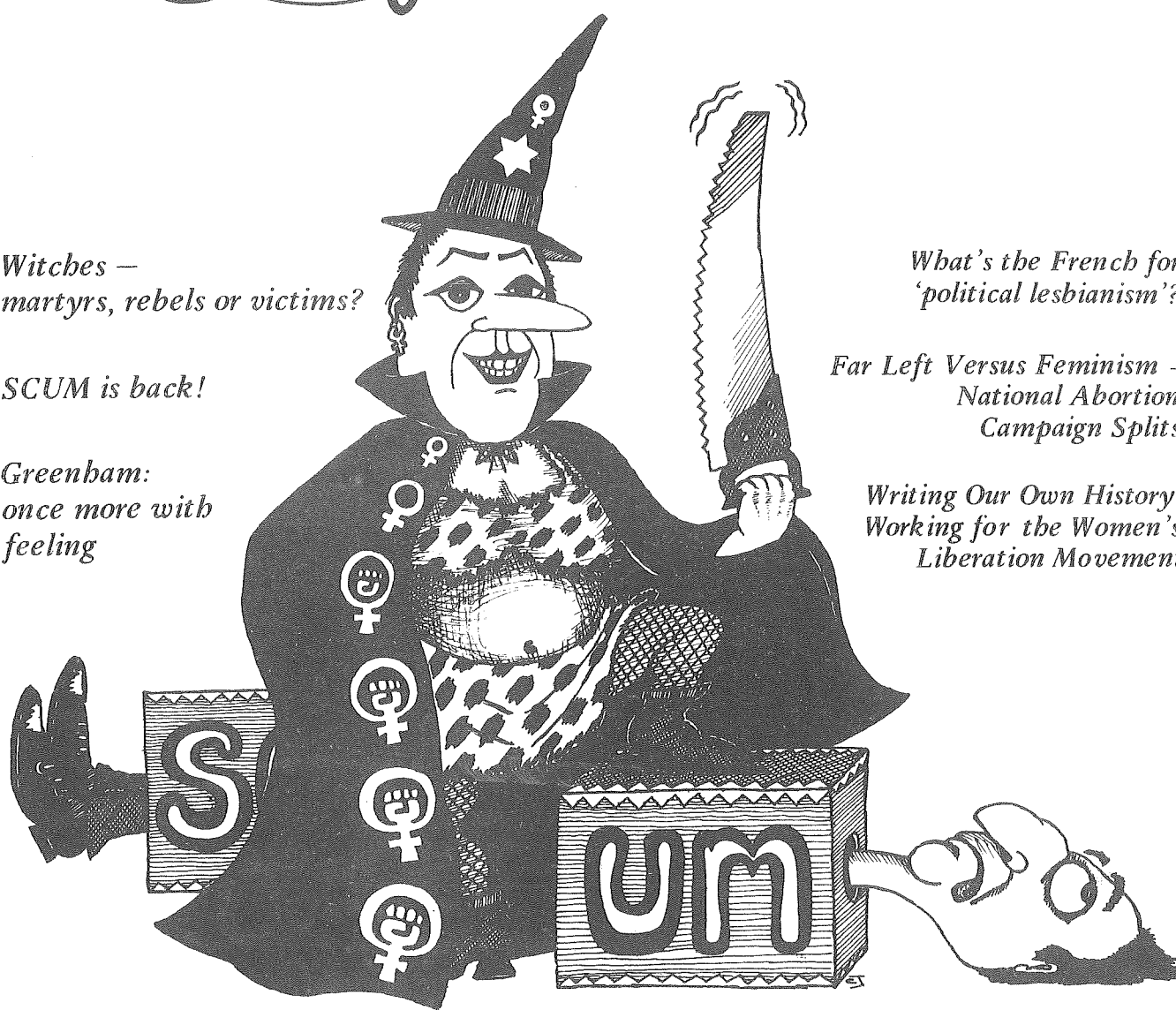
SCUM is back!

*Greenham:
once more with
feeling*

*What's the French for
'political lesbianism'?*

*Far Left Versus Feminism —
National Abortion
Campaign Splits*

*Writing Our Own History:
Working for the Women's
Liberation Movement*



Write for 'Trouble and Strife'!

So far, *Trouble and Strife* has mainly received articles from women known to members of the collective. We hope many others will feel free to send us suggestions or outlines for pieces they would like to write. We need your contributions.

We do not want to limit the magazine to reflecting a narrow range of views, politics or experience. We are open to ideas from any feminists and are willing to help or make suggestions if you would like us to work with you on features or interviews.

We also need cartoons, photographs and drawings to make the magazine work visually.

If you are interested in contributing to *Trouble and Strife*, get in touch with us, and the sooner the better!

Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble and Strife, PO Box MT16, Leeds LS17 5PY, Britain.

Trouble and Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Jalna Hanmer, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard and Ruth Wallsgrove, with help from Judy Stevens, Kate Taylor and Cath Jackson (illustrations), Julia Thomas, Sara Scott, Liz Kelly and Eva Garmarnikow (paste-up) Dianne Ceresa and Joyce Cunningham

Thanks to Sisterwrite for the use of their space.

Although we take collective responsibility for the contents, we do not necessarily agree with every article we print — only that we feel it is interesting. Unsolicited articles are welcomed; please enclose a stamped addressed envelope. We do not intend to publish poetry or fiction.

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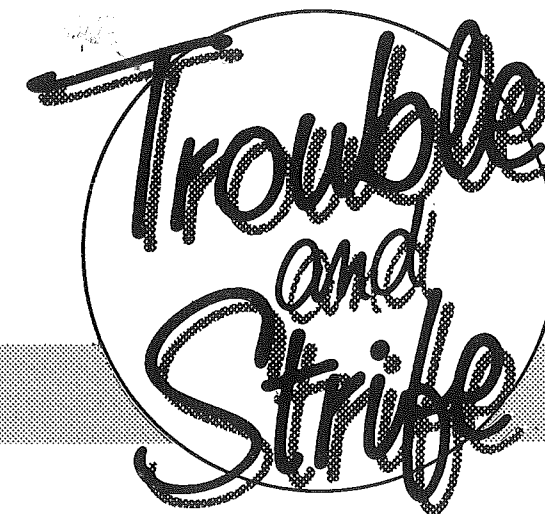
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Cover by Cath Jackson

Contents No.2



Letters: Greenham is a feminist issue; no 'christian' names; class, money and more	2
Writing For My Mother Pearlle McNeill	8
The New Myth of the Witch Rachel Hasted	10
Enemies of God or Victims of Patriarchy? Lynette Mitchell	18
For 'thrill-seeking females' only — Scum Manifesto revisited Jayne Egerton	21
What's the French for 'political lesbian'? Claire Duchon with translated pieces by 'Monique', Marie-Jo Davernas, Radical Lesbians of Jussieu and Nouvelles Questions Feministes	24
Born in Flames: an interview with Lizzie Borden Sharon Roughan	35
Women's liberation/left split in the National Abortion Campaign: whose right to choose? Alice Henry	39
Have you heard the one about sisterhood? Class and race in the Quest anthology Dena Attar	43
Review: Breaching the Peace Pam Muttram	47
Writing Our Own History: Interview with Wendy Collins, Al Garthwaite and Maria Spellacy, three of the first WIRES workers.	48

Letters

Greenham and radical feminism — no contradiction

After reading Ruth Wallsgrove's article in *Trouble and Strife* I wanted to write something much more positive about Greenham as I don't experience the same contradictions between my radical feminist politics and my involvement with Greenham.

I see nuclear weapons as the inevitable outcome of male-dominated science, militarism and politics — ie of male power. At Greenham, therefore, I see that I am challenging the whole mentality that legitimises all forms of individual and institutionalised male violence. Bombs may "kill men too", as one friend pointed out to me, but the risk of them killing me is something that has been imposed on me by men.

Many radical feminists have objected to Greenham on a number of grounds:

1) that 'peace' isn't a women's issue. Unless all issues are our issues we confine ourselves to the ghetto. I define 'peace' as freedom from oppression rather than absence of war — women are not at peace while we are mutilated and killed every day all over the world, and starve because of the mis-use of the world's resources.

Popular myth holds that war does not affect women, yet

- a) the prevailing ideology shifts in wartime and sends women out to work and children into nurseries. When this no longer suits men it shifts back again.
- b) in terms of military expenditure women pay for the social services cuts as we lose our jobs in 'caring' agencies and are forced back into caring roles in the home.
- c) Militarism and the military clearly re-inforce all that is anti-feminist and can be seen to epitomise male power and violence.
- d) the links between male sexuality and male violence are blatantly displayed by the

*indicates letter has been cut

military. The incidence of rape in wartime is well-documented, as is the use of women as prostitutes — often with the state as pimp. Male bonding occurs even across 'enemy' lines — in post-war Japan, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American occupiers were presented with Japanese 'comfort girls'.

2) that disarmament isn't 'the real struggle' and in any case could be achieved by men. Notions of a 'real struggle' within feminism are hierarchical and elitist. Granted, it may be more difficult to oppose, for example, male violence in the home, but many of us are involved in those struggles too and, on a personal level, do not have men at home anyway. We shouldn't deny the first-hand experiences of male violence that many women have had at Greenham, nor do we know how many women have left violent men in order to go there. I don't want men's peace because I don't believe it would last very long and it certainly wouldn't fundamentally alter women's lives.

3) that disarmament is a 'safe' issue — one that women can take up without getting our hands dirty. This patronises women, denies our right to choose where to place our energies, and denies the reality that becoming active on any issue is incredibly difficult for most women. Pornography, rape and incest could equally be said to be 'safe' since large sections of the Establishment ostensibly oppose these things too.

4) that Greenham presents an 'Earth Mother' image of women protecting their children. This certainly isn't the image presented by the media. Like Ruth, I find it sad that women don't care enough for themselves, but putting them down isn't going to improve matters. It would be strange if women who have experienced other forms of male violence did not fear for their daughters. Getting our politics right must not be at the expense of our humanity.

5) that non-violence is a naive and inappropriate way for feminists to struggle. Again this is patronising — it's often more difficult not to fight back. I realise that as a white

English woman I'm privileged to be able to choose non-violent tactics and still be relatively certain to remain alive. I do not presume to judge other women's struggles which have taken up arms. We need much more discussion about violence as we have no clear analysis of how using it ourselves affects us.

I think the WLM as a whole has much to learn from Greenham in terms of communication, imagination and tactics and it would be tragic if all that we've learned was not translated into action in our other campaigns. There must be many other uses for bolt cutters!

I fear the development of a radical feminist 'elite' that tolerates only a very narrow band of opinion and spends its time opposing other women instead of opposing male power. I don't mean that we should compromise our views but that we must accept women's right to be wherever they are — we all come from somewhere — and support, or at least not oppose, all struggles that can be termed 'feminist'. The WLM must become accessible to all women and we must be prepared to listen to other women's views.

I think all women are feminists by experience, but many will never find the WLM unless it clearly offers them better treatment than the world outside. A conference on male violence would have been a much more positive action than the anti-Greenham conference.

In sisterhood,
Judy Cavanagh.

Religion as a basis for politics

- * A publically available forum for radical feminist viewpoints is in itself a heartening and invigorating development. Whether the available is also accessible will depend not only on a price that does not preclude any but committed academics, but also its style.

In particular, the first article I tackled, Ruth Wallsgrove's opinions of Greenham

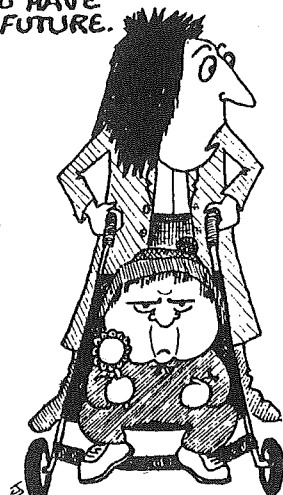
Common quickly managed to anger and confuse me with an objectively disparaging approach to an issue that almost by definition is based on emotional rather than intellectual analysis. The concept of emotional analysis itself must be an alien almost contradictory one to most academic feminists, but I would like to introduce it here as a means to bridge the gap between what is perceived in our society as 'political' as opposed to spiritual. It seems to me that Ruth, in trying to be cleverly dispassionate about the issues involved in the women's peace movement, has fallen headlong into the traditionally patriarchal mentality of dividing life up into easily ruled separate compartments. In doing so, her article comes over logically 'correct' but personally sterile and empty. I am not arguing that we should simply and unquestioningly follow our gut feelings — the reverse: as feminists we can and must look to a different way of understanding different tactics than patriarchy has ever given us scope to consider.

This problem was noted some years ago by Americans Davis and Weaver writing in *Quest* (1975): "The so-called division between cultural feminism and patriarchal feminism is a debilitating result of our oppression. It comes from the patriarchal view that the spiritual and the intellectual operate in separate realms. To deny the spiritual while doing political work, or to cultivate the spiritual at the expense of another's political and economic well-being is continuing the patriarchal game."

Ruth herself begrudgingly acknowledges that "many women are moved by Greenham in a way that they have not been moved by feminism" but instead of really trying to learn from and incorporate these lessons into feminism she seems more concerned to nitpick the ideological shortcomings of the Greenham women as though these in themselves are reasons to choose the Women's Liberation Movement *instead*. I'm afraid, in my ideological naivety, I had not until then been aware that the two were mutually exclusive alternatives,

I WANT MY CHILD
TO HAVE
A FUTURE.

Cath Jackson from 'Breaching the Peace'



I WOULDN'T MIND
A FUTURE
MYSELF.



(which is different from the position of some feminists in seeing peace issues as detracting from their separatist agenda.) Here I can only state my personal view that the nuclear threat is fundamental to me not in opposition to my womanhood but as the ultimate threat to it. But my concern in this letter is not to argue these issues in themselves, not to speak on behalf of any woman at Greenham but to debate the way of thinking and arguing that allows one to stay ambivalent (or almost literally sitting on the fence) faced with real (but non-material) achievements of 'the Peace Women'.

It is interesting that Ruth's article begins with her account of the dragon festival "I don't know where the organisers had got the idea of a dragon symbolising women's strength and I don't think I want to..." Is this sincere? I find it very hard to believe that any woman with a feminist background could be ignorant of the historical and mythological significance of the dragon representing women's fierce independence from the constraints of male culture; such symbolism cannot be so summarily dismissed. The women at Greenham in this and so many aspects of their



Norma Pitfield

approach are harnessing a deep source of spiritual power to confront the public world of male politics. This is a power, and an 'hysteria' that men do not and never can possess. Seldom recognised, it is a secret strength that has carried women through worse times than these. It is the fundamental life energy which all women share and which no amount of intellectual argument, enforced obedience or brute force can deny, and it is the reason why the women's peace movement has attracted far more than the narrow group-joining band of white middle-class 'feminists'.

I can feel pen-wielding and activist feminists already jumping down my throat for such a naive, apolitical generalisation but I would question whose politics they are so quick to defend, and why a movement that so prides itself on its openness, flexibility and lack of hierarchical structure is so reluctant to consider a different framework for approaching politics. After all, a few years ago, sex would have been greeted with ridicule and outrage as a basis for approaching politics, so why now, rule out religion?

Such an approach cannot be effectively conveyed in a short paper, nor really in a long one because it demands a quite different frame of mind to the logical rationality that men are so good at and we have been indoctrinated into believing is the only way forward. If one instead sidesteps and acknowledges the strength of intuitive impressions, of imaginary fantasies, and of intense feelings that words cannot describe, one can begin to (un)earth a far vaster scope of consciousness than contemporary pressures have allowed. Women are beginning to discover how men have robbed us of our bodies by pornography and violence in its many forms, of our minds by domestic imprisonment into male social structures. Deeper than these and far more devastating in its impact is male theft and abuse of our spirits for, in the words of the song, 'You can't kill the spirit...'

The women at Greenham don't need to "talk about sexuality or marriage as political issues", when they are exploring something much deeper than these. How else

could it be that "the peace camp is passionate" and "very seductive" without some appeal more radical than anything the women's liberation movement has yet discovered. Greenham has hit home for so many women as an opportunity not to sit in one more theoretical meeting, nor to be just another empty number on a demo, but to discover for themselves and share with others a whole new meaning to political action based on women's reality not men's. Could this be why the women there don't bother to advertise their personal — or economic — politics; why Ruth can't find a category for them; and why, whatever their direct effectiveness against the physical presence of cruise missiles, they are more threatening to the established order than all the rest of the feminist movement combined. Because feminists they are, in the most radical sense of the word. This is not a wet dream but a more devastating potential than many dare realise. As women they are finding new ways of organising their lives and the whole of society.

With love and hope,
Jill Chadwin,
Todmorden, Lancs.

Unfair to socialist feminists?

*I liked *Trouble and Strife*, though haven't yet been able to read it all. Also, I feel that a lot of the references to socialist-feminism don't seem to bear much relationship to socialist-feminism as I understand/experience it — but more to 'feminism' within left groups, perhaps. Either way, I feel a little saddened by it, but given some of the outrages perpetrated in the name of socialist-feminism it's maybe to be expected.

I particularly want to read the Zionism/anti-semitism article — a friend was very impressed. I also very much enjoyed Ruth Wallsgrove on Greenham Common — quite the best thing I've read on it (I've just been watching the news and the threats to shoot if necessary to 'defend' the base).

Still — I think it's a great addition to feminist periodicals: about the right intellec-

tual balance for me. Have you got lots of subs to survive? And have you had a good response?

Maureen Wright,
Bristol.

Christian assumptions

It might seem a small point but I wanted to write to object to a phrase used in Margot Farnham's article on slimming in *Trouble and Strife* no. 1. She says, "I read a story by Henry Handel Richardson (Christened Ethel Florence)..."

As someone who has very definitely not been christened, I have always found it offensive when the word 'christened' is used to mean named. It's like saying that non-Christians don't have a name, don't have an identity. I can't think of anything much more symbolic of compulsory Christianity than that! And though I'm not Jewish myself I did find it a bit ironic to read this straight after Dena Attar's article on anti-semitism.

Yours in sisterhood,
Hilary Saltburn,
Manchester.

What is class?

*Marlene Packwood, thank you for your thoughtful article.

I am sure you are right that middle-class women often are complacent, patronising and unimaginative, and do sometimes use their articulacy and education as a weapon rather than a bridge. They often don't realise their own advantages, and, yes, they often do resort to ignorant stereotypes. But...

You mention the working-class woman's culture, ideals, hopes and plans for a feminist future. Here you had a good opportunity in a long article to at least sketch out where these differed from those of middle-class women, so that we could see and discuss the differences, and find areas where perhaps both groups were missing out. (You obliquely referred to one; the middle-class fear of displaying emotion or getting angry.)

Like lots of middle-class women, both I and my husband are of working class roots a generation back. All I tend to mean by middle-class is 'educated', articulate and able to use the media.

I totally agree that using one's bootstraps for a ladder and then pulling it up behind one is an unlovely thing to do, but I certainly have never felt that the middle-classes were "greedily preventing access" of anyone to it. More I would say that they are constantly preaching and lecturing and trying to impart it to people who, as you say, they then 'absorb'. I don't think you can simultaneously accuse the same bunch of people of both excluding *and* absorbing.

I agree about the non-existent contribution of the working class, but not as a shocking new fact. It simply follows from my own definition. The people who dominate the media, write the books and make the images simply *are* the middle class. And Marlene Packwood, trenchant, articulate, highly verbal, is too. You are not more aware of your origins than many a novelist; Laurie Lee, the author of *Cider with Rosie*, D.H. Lawrence, many others *have* tried to get across what they valued in their working class background. It is now infinitely easier to be listened to on the media with a regional, low-status accent than it used to be — people don't have to deny their background as they used to.

I don't really understand the bit about "denying working-class women a language" by the use of elaborate phrases, academic jargon, and the rest. It happens, but I haven't noticed it in the feminist press — and anyway it is usually condemned by those who really want to communicate. In any case, I see no difference between the way you write, presumably with this problem in mind, and the way I am doing. How many working class women do you know who could define the words, "catalyst", "misogynist", "validation" which you have used in several places? How concerned were you that working class women would be able to understand your piece?

Again, you say that "The methods of teaching literacy remain middle-class". Is there a working-class method? Is there any

other method which would work better? (There ought to be.) Do you mean anything by this beyond "Middle-class children succeed better at becoming literate"? Again, it's not good; we should do more about it but, again, it is one of the things by which we define class, not a new and shocking discovery; nor is the lack of working-class symphonists and heart surgeons.

Where I do say, "Yes, Amen", is the so-often barely-disguised patronising of the working-classes, the stereotypes you discuss, the cosy ignorance of money problems, the emotional coldness and "sceptical, objective distancing" which you describe so well. These often result in hostility and rudeness from the "other side" which is only too understandable, but makes it difficult for any one individual to stop the rot. But you are right that those who have most of the advantages should be making all the gestures and holding out more genuine offers of sisterly support. I wish, though, that you could have offered to the (mainly middle-class?) readership a slightly less doleful view of the working-class — if, as you tend to suggest, their attitudes consist of resentment about what the middle-classes have and they haven't, then it is hardly surprising that people deny their roots once they gain these goodies.

As a child I used regularly to visit for holidays an elderly aunt in the heart of Failsworth, a working-class area of Manchester. I was always sorry to leave, and in many respects have only realised in adulthood what that community had which the one I live in now doesn't. It would probably sound patronising of me now to try to describe their culture, and anyhow this has been done many times over in books like Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Next time, Ms Packwood, please try to make *us* feel jealous of what they have which often we haven't; it might be a more effective way in the long run of making us listen. Don't talk as though they must in every way always be clients. A lot of women sometimes feel they are prisoners of middle-classness.

Hilary Potts,
London, W13.

Paying writers

Welcome to *Trouble and Strife*. I'm sure it's going to be wonderful.

The news on your introductory leaflet was rather less wonderful. "Contributors are not paid". You mean that's *policy*? Great. Another opportunity for women writers, photographers and artists to work for nothing.

You may reply that you can't afford to pay contributors. Surely all that means is that you haven't budgeted for it. It hasn't seemed like a priority. Why? Because contributors, unlike, say, printers, should be willing to work for nothing? Because contributors have other sources of income? Because production and distribution costs are high and you want to keep the price down? Or because you know that whereas you *have* to pay printers/distributors or else they don't print/distribute, contributors will contribute anyway. A good monetarist argument, that, but it cannot be what you mean.

Good for you, the collective, if you are able and willing to work for nothing. I'm sure you'll find that many of your contributors will be too . . . but not all, and I don't think you have a right to assume it. What about unwaged women? What about struggling freelancers for whom time spent contributing to *Trouble and Strife* will be time taken away from earning their livings?

Please consider setting aside a budget for contributors' fees — say 10% of the price of each copy sold. If this increases your price that's unfortunate, but the alternative is to exact an enforced subsidy from some women, whose work is to be sold but not paid for.

What do women who have already contributed to *Trouble and Strife* feel about this?

In sisterhood,
Zoe Fairbairns,
London, SE20.

Where the money goes now: it cost us over £2,500 to produce the first issue of Trouble and Strife. We got most of the money in donations and loans, and the rest was raised through subscriptions and from bidden donations from members of the collective (as fares, stamps and telephone calls). The major cost was, of course, printing and typesetting (£1,737), and equipment and layout boards (£247), publicity (£187) and stamps (£153). The distributors and book-shops together take over 50% of the £1.50 charged in shops. Obviously all the collective work for nothing. We see it as political work. We feel the price we have to ask is high, but even so we'll only just be able to meet our second print bill.

What does anyone else think about payment for writers?

Welcome

* I read *Trouble and Strife* from cover to cover on my way home from the meeting where I bought it. It's the most exciting and stimulating and challenging journal/magazine I've seen recently. I too admire *off our backs* and look forward to reading it as I used to in the earlier days of *Spare Rib*, and I think we could gain a lot by taking up the way they report conferences and discuss current debates in feminism.

My copy has already been read by two other women and I've only had it two days! One of them is a Dutch woman and because English isn't her first language she often finds some feminist writings difficult and alienating. She asked me to tell you that she was able to read many of the articles easily, she understood what women were saying and liked the way it was written.

Once again congratulations, it's so good to read something that I both identify with but which also challenges me. Looking forward to no. 2!

In sisterhood,
Liz Kelly,
Norwich.

Writing For My Mother

Pearlie McNeill on being a working-class feminist writer.

I was in my second year at high school when I wrote my first play. It was lousy. What was important about the experience was that I readily accepted the discipline necessary to write it.

Throughout teen years I wrote fiction and poetry but by the time I was twenty I'd stopped writing altogether. Thirteen years passed.

I'd married, moved to the suburbs, had two children, one long breakdown and struggled to find a reason for living.

Then my marriage broke up.

Through visits to a women's health centre, I was introduced to feminist ideas.

It was no easy victory but, as many of us know, feminism often prefers a gradual takeover.

Now, years later, the commitment is a way of life.

I began writing again in 1975.

This time I chose to think of myself as beginning an apprenticeship. The apprenticeship will probably never finish but the confidence gained from adopting this approach has encouraged a sense of identity to emerge. I am a writer.

A woman writer.

A feminist writer.

A working-class writer.

Whilst we all have perceptions on what being a woman and a feminist means to us as individuals, it is less clear what role feminism should play in our work, or what it is that constitutes a definition of feminist writing. Similarly, it can be difficult to define what is meant when I say I'm a working-class writer.

As an avid reader of popular fiction in the 50s and 60s I often felt that there was a division between the writer and myself that could not be bridged. This division I now realise had to do with class. The publishing tradition has largely reflected middle-class values and it is therefore not surprising that a *them* and *us* situation can occur on the part of the reader, if from the subject matter, and the way it is written about, readers are unable to identify or relate to the material on a gut level.

Many feminist writers, despite their purpose and vision, have been imbued with certain standards and values through learning institutions, particularly in the case of universities, and much of what I read in the mid 70s was lost to me as, I was obviously more aware of this *them* and *us* situation than what the author was saying.

I'm not suggesting that a book, article, short story or poem has to be written using simple language, easy to understand concepts and so on. What I do want to stress is the importance of developing an ability to create a comfortable rapport between reader and writer. A rapport that makes it possible to cut across distinctions of class.

It is a myth to believe that women from working-class backgrounds are unable to grasp difficult concepts and complicated language. It is the presentation of concepts and language that needs more and more thought. It is also unfair for women from

working-class backgrounds not to consider what could be a lack of confidence on their part when brought face to face with articulation; often falsely assumed to be the prerogative of the middle-class.

The commonality of our experience as women, no matter what our background, means that we all have some areas of identification with other women. If we are to write as communicators, then we need to explore this 'identification' factor more fully, to enable us to establish, maintain and reinforce a better sort of relationship with readers.

The fact that I now have time to write and that I live my life with more choice and direction than my mother ever had, or her mother before her ever had, is an indication of how far I have travelled from my working-class origins.

Yet, it is from those origins, and my struggles to understand what those origins mean, that my material for writing is drawn.

I have often said that I write for my mother. In saying this I mean, that if years ago, my mother could have read the sort of material that I strive to write, then maybe her life and my earlier years might have been less painful.

As it is, my mother has been lost to her conditioning, but there are countless numbers of mothers and daughters who may not be lost and, knowing the language, experience and impact of working-class life, it is from here that I begin my craft. I am a writer. I am a woman writer. I am a feminist writer. I am a working-class writer.

Still, there is a paradox here and I am acutely aware of it. Only by changing my lifestyle dramatically and learning slowly and painfully how to take my life into my control, am I able to write out and resolve whole chunks of the past. Things like growing up with a violent father and recovering from depression and breakdown despite the dubious skills of the medical profession.

Feminism has provided me with a framework from which I can evaluate my life and society in general. Feminism has also given me an education. In doing so it has removed the deprivation and isolation which my life seemed to be all about. In effect, it could be said that feminism has in many ways removed me from my working-class origins. Yet, the truth remains that I am shaped and somehow defined by that background and I have no wish to demolish that shape or cast off the definition.

As a working-class writer, committed to working within a feminist tradition, there are moments of negativity (fortunately decreasing in number) when I feel uncomfortable and even inferior, within the embrace of the women's movement.

The task of creating a feminist tradition is no mean challenge. More and more feminist writers are breaking away from male publishing standards and traditions, exploring, experimenting and evolving new ways of written expression.

Language itself can be a problem. Feminists have stressed the importance of creating new words, of reclaiming and/or redefining existing words in an effort to overcome the restrictions that a sexist language has placed on women.

Then too, writing is therapy. A means of finding answers and resolution. This factor is often a very necessary step in the development of our craft. It is in this area of insight, awareness and resolution that our integrity and emotional honesty can be put to great advantage.

These qualities, coupled with an ability to meet a subject matter head on has meant that women writers, through the years, have refused the temptation to write objectively and in resisting that temptation have struggled to provide new approaches to old problems.

As feminists and writers we continue that struggle. Finding new approaches for old problems. □



Hilary Ramsden

Having broken at last the complex yet fragile ties of the mother-daughter relationship, they would be able to see each other in a new light....

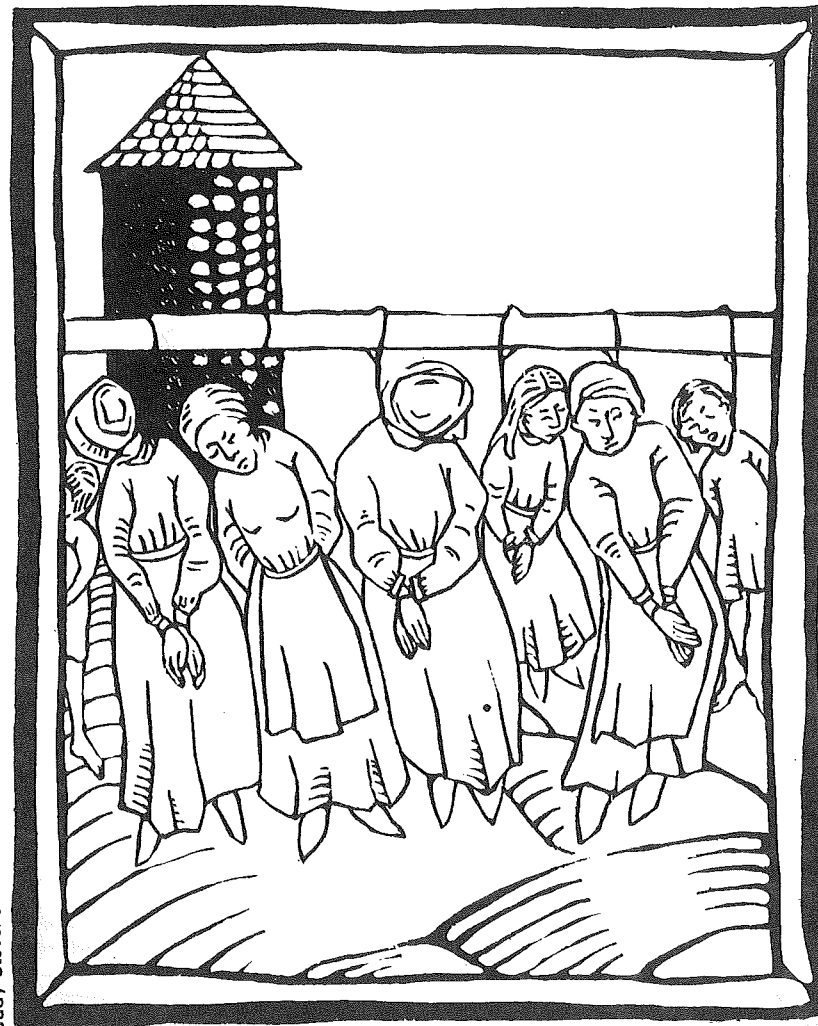


This paper was written for the Feminist Writers Conference held in Edinburgh 2th/10th July 1983. A collection of papers on feminism and writing, based on the conference papers, and edited by Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielsen is expected to be published later in the year.

I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Gail Chester for providing the stimulus and encouragement that prompted this article.

The New Myth of the Witch

In challenging male historians' attitudes towards witch-hunting, have feminists produced their own distortions? The witches have been presented as a sort of medieval women's health movement. Rachel Hasted looks at the evidence about one well-known trial and finds that the women involved fit the new stereotype very badly.



Judy Stevens

"... when these things shall be related to posterity, they shall be reputed matters fained, not done." (Thomas Potts, 1613)¹

On Thursday, 20th August 1612, ten people were executed for the practice of witchcraft, at Lancaster. Of these, 8 were women, ranging in age from Alizon Device in her teens to Anne Whittle in her eighties. The other two were the sons of two of the executed women, one of them seems to have been mentally handicapped. Many of those executed were condemned on his evidence, and that of his sister — a nine year old girl. In the trial of any other offence this evidence would have been ruled inadmissible. Among others so convicted were the mother and sister of the chief witnesses.

There should have been another woman executed; but Elizabeth Southernes, also in her eighties, had died in Lancaster Castle prison, where twenty suspects had been kept for several months before the trials. Conditions in the medieval Well Tower dungeon, 20ft by 12ft, and without light or ventilation, had been to say the least unhealthy.

Those convicted of capital witchcraft offences were hung in England, and it was customary after the public execution for the bodies to be burned and the ashes scattered, leaving no trace for the relic hunters.

Even at the time this trial and execution were sensational. The accused became known as the 'Pendle Witches' after the

remote area of Lancashire from which some of them came. Unusually, a full account of their examination before magistrates, and of the trials, was published by Thomas Potts, clerk of the court at Lancaster, a man anxious to keep in well with the Establishment by praising the judges and magistrates, and showing the defendants in the worst possible light. From this biased reporter comes nearly all the information about the case which is still available. His account was apparently rushed into print, as it is full of printing errors, which add to the difficulties of the modern reader.

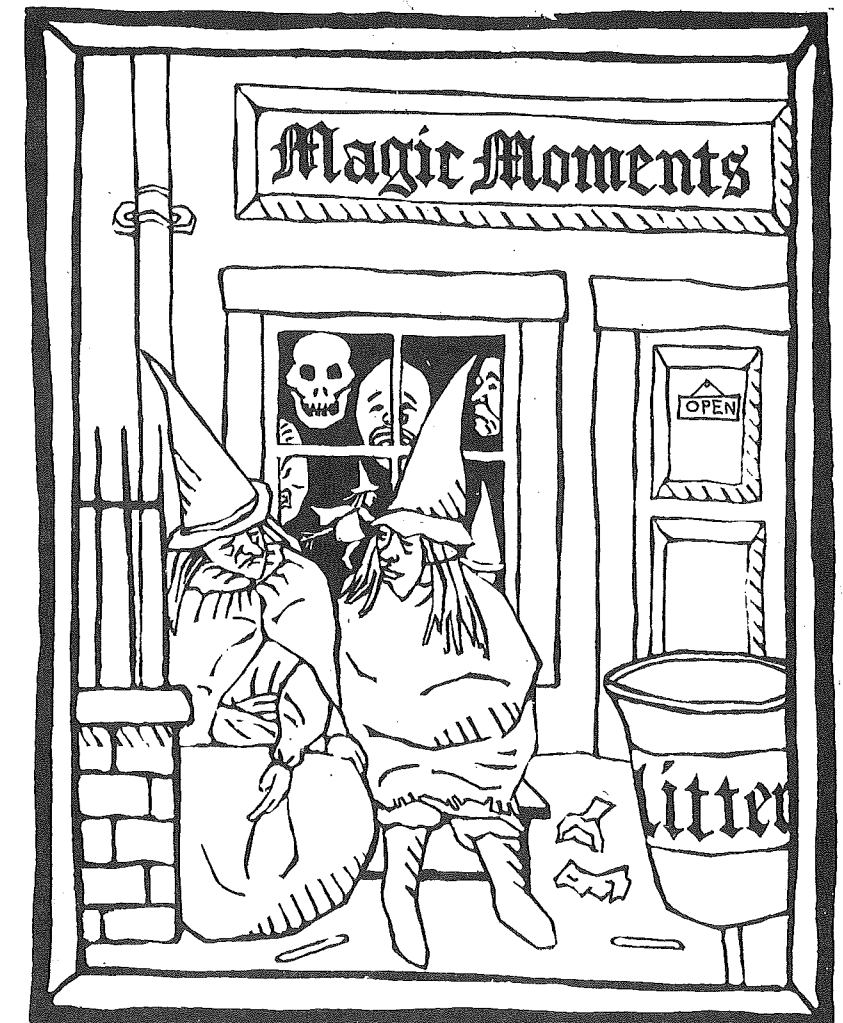
Modern male attitudes

Lancaster is still the centre of one of England's most enduring witch legends. The local tourist bureau has just launched an advertising campaign headlined: *The Magick of Lancaster*, with a 17th century wood-cut of several women being hanged, and illustrations of 'familiaris', 'witch-puppets', and a witch-pricker's knife. There is a local pub called the 'Water Witch', and British Rail even have an engine on the local line called the 'Lancashire Witch'. Tourist shops all over the county sell little black-hatted figures on pipe-cleaner broomsticks and guide-books to 'the witch country' with lurid accounts of their doings.

Some so-called 'serious' local historians claim to disbelieve in the powers of the reputed witches, but suggest that they were guilty of other 'real' crimes, which make their deaths more acceptable. A classic version of this approach is contained in a pamphlet written in 1957, and still on sale in libraries throughout the county:

... it was almost inevitable that such characters as Demdike and Chattox, (nick-names of Anne Whittle and Elizabeth Southernes) cunning, cruel, and living in dire poverty, should be regarded as witches ...

With the exceptions of Alice Nutter and Anne Redfern, all the 'witches' betrayed abnormalities. Demdike and Chattox, the two distressed old women of eighty, were failing mentally but cunning enough to implicate each other in the crime of witchcraft and, with the ignorance and pride of old age, boasted of the powers they claimed to possess ... Elizabeth Davies, soured in mind by her disfigurement, was taciturn and moody and reluctantly admitted only what other people had said; characteristically she went into a frenzy of passion when she heard the lies spoken by her own children against her.



Judy Stevens

Gift shop in Pendle

Alizon, James and Jenet were, in modern parlance, 'problem children'. Alizon was frightened, credulous, ignorant and suffering from the ill effects of poverty and the character of her family; James was subnormal, vicious, incapable of work and had the imaginative mind of a child; he was prepared to embroider the figments of his imagination with as many details as Nowell (the prosecuting magistrate) was prepared to believe; Jenet was selfish, self-centred, and ready to say anything if only she could please the Court. With such people as Demdike, Chattox, Alizon, James and Jenet as witnesses, the magistrate would have little difficulty in getting answers to his questions that would inevitably lead them to the scaffold.

This sinister passage tells us a lot more about 20th century male attitudes than it does about what really happened. To the author it seems "almost inevitable" that women should be punished for being old, disabled, unmarried, out of work, or just

failing to please. He reduces the male magistrates and judges in the case to almost passive figures, born along by the women's suicidal urge to convict themselves.

Feminists respond

Faced with such an appalling mixture of 20th century male value judgements masquerading as history, it is hardly surprising that many women have recently been taking another look at the evidence on witchcraft trials from a feminist perspective. We need to challenge the completely negative image male historians project in passages like this, and to turn the spotlight on the motives and activities of the witch-hunters that made such trials possible.

In reclaiming the image of the witch as a positive figure however, some new stereotypes are emerging among feminist writers, which it might be useful to check against the available evidence, before they become completely accepted as fact. If we believe that it is important to destroy the fantasy figure of the wicked witch because it affects the way we see ourselves and our history as women, we should be equally careful about what we put in its place. In this article I want to look at some feminist interpretations of witch persecution; especially those concerning the witch as healer; to see how they fit with the evidence we have for the 'Pendle Witch' case, which is unusually well documented.

The new image of the 'witch' emerging from all sorts of women's writing suggests that the people accused of witchcraft all over Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries; of whom a large majority were women; were in fact lay healers, pagan Old Believers, proto-feminists, and peasant revolutionaries, consciously fighting an underground war of resistance against the patriarchal state and christian church. The similarity between this description and the heroic ideal of many present day feminists ought perhaps to make us suspicious. I would question whether we have good evidence for any of these theories. Most of what we know about 'witchcraft' activities was extorted for show-trial confessions. Writers are often curiously partial about which 'evidence' they are prepared to believe.

Persecuted lay healers?

The idea of the 'witch' as a persecuted lay healer goes back a long way. Matilda J. Gage wrote in 1893:

But while for many hundred years the knowledge of medicine, and its practice among the poorer classes, was almost entirely in the hands of women and many discoveries in science are due to them, yet an acquaintance of herbs soothing to pain, or healing in their qualities, was then looked upon as having been acquired through diabolic agency.

... The Church having forbidden its offices and all external methods of knowledge to women, was profoundly stirred with indignation at her having through her own wisdom penetrated some of the most deeply subtle secrets of nature.³

This quotation introduces several aspects of the modern witch myth that persist from book to book:

- a) The 'witch' as barefoot doctor, ministering to her fellow peasants, while under attack from the patriarchal state, church, and male medical profession.
- b) Witchcraft as a scientifically organised body of medical knowledge based on the use of plant-derived drugs.
- c) Women as having a special 'natural wisdom' which enables them to understand healing intuitively.
- d) Women as a natural focus for resistance to christianity and the state. (This idea was developed by Margaret Murray in her book *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, 1921. Murray argues for a secret society of fertility cult worshippers, led by witches who knew "the deeply subtle secrets of nature".)

Many of these ideas have since been most influentially taken up by Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English in their pamphlet *Witches, Midwives and Nurses, A History of Women Healers*, 1973. Taking the whole of Europe from the 14th to the 17th centuries as their theme, they state that:

The great majority of (witches) were lay healers serving the peasant population. (p22)
The women's health movement of today has ancient roots in the medieval coven. (p23)
The wise women, or witch, had a host of remedies which had been tested in years of use. Many of the herbal remedies developed by witches still have their place in modern pharmacology. (p30)

The partnership between Church, State and the medical profession reached full bloom in the witch trials. (p35)⁴

Ehrenreich and English are now quoted as authority on these points by writers as diverse as Mary Daly and Erica Jong.

The idea of women's 'natural' association with healing has been taken up by the matriarchalists. In *The Wise Wound*, 1978, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove argue that:

What is called witchcraft is the *natural* concern of all women

and:

... witchcraft is the *natural* craft of the woman. It is this because witchcraft is the subjective experience of the menstrual cycle ...

and:

In the Middle Ages it has been estimated that 9 million women were burned as witches for exercising their *natural* crafts of midwifery, hypnotism, healing, dowsing, dream-study and sexual fulfillment.⁵

In *Gyn/Ecology*, 1978, Mary Daly writes:

Clearly they (doctors) are not willing to attribute such *wisdom and healing power* to the *native talent and superiority of women*. During the witcheraze the solution was to attribute *female power* to the 'fact' that they were tools of the devil...⁶
(My emphasis in all quotations.)

The problem of evidence

I would not wish to underestimate the significance of witchcraft persecutions to women's history, but I doubt if, at present, we are in a position to back up claims like these: It is a huge subject; the widespread existence of witch beliefs over many centuries, in many parts of the world, coupled with the extremely doubtful character of much of the recorded 'evidence' for them, has meant that something can be found to support almost any theory, providing you don't mind quoting out of context.

The problem of evidence from witchcraft trials, which is almost all produced by the accusers, has often been discussed, but not resolved. It is extremely difficult to unravel from written records those things which the accused believed, the lies that were forced from them, and the facts of the case. Quoting from such material is always a matter of the interpreter's own judgement, which is never without bias, and should be checked against the available information whenever possible, before it is accepted. For example, in my own case, I have had to study the Thomas Potts

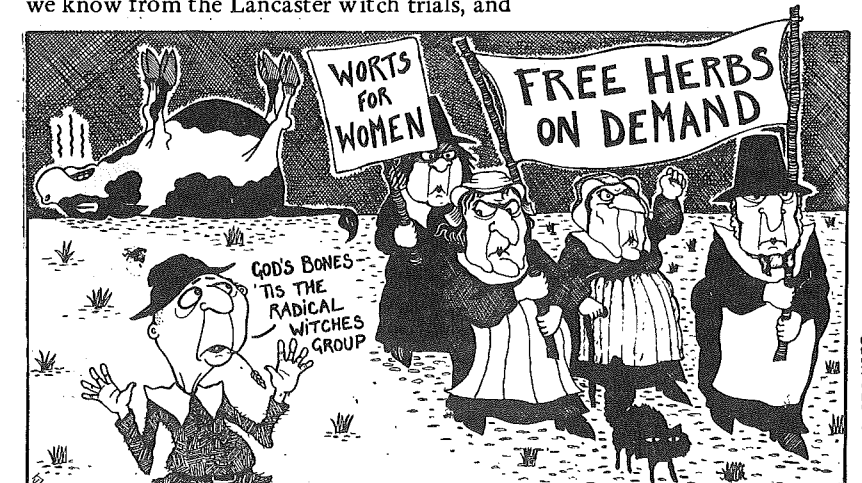
account of the 'Pendle Witches' as all other writers on the subject have, because it is the only available record from the time. However, my interpretation of it is very different from say Walter Bennet (quoted earlier).

I think we should look closely at the value judgements we are being asked to accept in the quotations given here. Two aspects in particular strike me as worrying:

- 1) The insistence on women's 'natural power' to heal. Is this like their well-advertised 'natural' mothering and nurturing instincts? Do we want to believe that women instinctively know what treatment to give, without any need for hard work and study?
- 2) The glamour of the underground movement. (Interestingly 'glamour' was originally a spell of illusion cast by a witch.) The idea of a clandestine organisation throughout Europe, lasting for centuries, passing on medical knowledge through generations of women, resisting male oppression, is powerful — we write wistfully about it, seeing the witches as a women's health movement with admirable socialist aims. Mary Daly writes of witches as "a spiritual/moral/known elite cross-section of the female populations of Europe". Is that what we want to be? Do we imagine a Women's Health Movement today that can never be more than a persecuted, secretive elite, ministering to a grateful peasantry?

The case of the Lancaster witch trials

How far is this picture of a 'natural' elite group of women healers born out in an individual case? I would like to look at what we know from the Lancaster witch trials, and



Cath Jackson

examine the evidence regarding the healing skills and activities of the accused.

Firstly, there is no record in the trial documents of any of the accused healing any person or animal successfully, although they were asked to try. John Nutter called in Elizabeth Southernes to 'amend' his sick cow; what she did we do not know, but it died four days later. The reputation of a witch was such, however, that this was not seen as a failure, but deliberate malice on her part. In evidence Alizon Device said that she believed "that her sayd Grandmother (Southernes) did bewitch the cow to death".

It would be possible to argue that 'white witchcraft' was not mentioned at the trial because, though illegal, it put the accused in a good light. However, there is one telling instance at the end of Alizon Device's trial where she was confronted with her supposed victim, John Law. Apparently suffering from the effects of a stroke, he is described as having:

... his head . . . drawn awrie, his Eyes and face deformed, His speech not well to be understood; his Thighes and Leggs starke lame; his arms lame especially the left side, his hands lame and turned out of their course . . .

Alizon was asked if, having as she confessed bewitched this man, she could return him to his former health. To which "she answered she could not, and so did many of the rest of the witches; But shee, with others affirmed, That if old Demdike (her grandmother) had lived, shee could and would have helped him out of that great miserie . . ."7

This sounds very much like the birth of a legend. Alizon was obviously most impressed by her grandmother's powers. Even in the case of the cow that died instead of getting better, we have seen that she believed it was her grandmother's doing. It also suggests that no great 'craft' had been passed down through the family, since the younger members of the coven felt themselves less able than their forbears.

Knowledge of herbs?

As to the "host of remedies . . . tested in years of use", that the women were using, there are several clues in the records. The first interesting point, however, is that there is absolutely no mention of herbs or medications by anyone in the case. The only 'magic' substances mentioned are eight

human teeth, gathered from a new turned grave by Anne Whittle and shared with Elizabeth Southernes. (This point is laboured in the trial because grave robbery however trivial contravened the Witchcraft Act of 1604.) There is also mention of a communion wafer allegedly smuggled out of church for use in witchcraft, and two sticks in the form of a cross, left over a can of milk as a charm to protect it.

This seems to me an important point. We know that many women did have knowledge of herbal remedies. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries a stream of books appeared with titles such as *A Breviary of Health*, 1587, *The Good Housewives' Treasure*, 1588, *Delights for Ladies*, 1594, and even *A Choice Manuall of rare and select secrets in Physick and Chirurgery* by Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent, 1653. These books were not banned, and their authors were not accused of witchcraft. It was not the power of healing or harming alone that led to a charge of witchcraft, but such power when thought to come from supernatural forces.

Many of the statements made by the accused refer to the use of clay images of intended victims. These were stuck with thorns or pins to cause illness, or crumbled to cause death. The parish constable is said to have found such a 'puppet' along with human teeth, when he searched Malkin Tower, home of Elizabeth Southernes and her family.

King James 1 dealt at length with the use of clay images to destroy a victim in his influential book on witchcraft *Daemonologie*, 1597. This book was known to the presiding judges at the Lancaster trial, to Potts the clerk of the court, and probably to the examining magistrates. It is therefore possible that all this evidence is false, or taken completely out of context to fit King James' theory.

Curses and prayers

Most of the other harmful acts attributed to the accused were said to have been achieved by means of curses, and the use of familiar spirits. Both of these also figure largely in King James' *Daemonologie*. Here it is the interpretation of animals as 'familiaris', and angry words as witches' malice, which give an ominous significance to otherwise trivial stories. The testimony indicates

that where a person was a reputed witch, the death or misfortune of anyone against whom s/he held malice, (a grudge), even months or years after a quarrel, was held to show the witch's destructive power.

Several of the accused admitted to using what the Court termed charms, but which they called "Prayers". Three of these are recorded, and as they were apparently volunteered by the defendants and might give some clue to their beliefs about healing, I will quote from them. They are usually described as being 'garbled' and nonsensical words of ignorant women, but I think some of their original meaning can still be understood if they are read carefully.

The first is a Prayer which Elizabeth Device taught her children "to get drink": "Cruçifixus hoc signum vitam Eternam. Amen." (This is ungrammatical latin, but might be translated: "This cross is the sign of eternal life. Amen.")

The second is Anne Whittle's charm for mending sour beer which was thought to be 'forespoken' or bewitched:

Three Biters hast thou bitten,
The Hart, ill Eye, ill Tongue:
Three Bitter shall be thy Boote (amends, help or remedy)
Father, Sonne and Holy Ghost
a Gods name.
Five Pater-nosters, five Avies,
And a Creede,
In worship of five wounds
of Our Lord.

The third is an extremely long poem, "to cure one bewitched". It is entirely christian in its language, beginning:

Upon Good Friday I will fast while I may
Until I hear them knell
Our Lords own Bell,

and ending:

Sweet Jesus our Lord. Amen.⁷

What do these prayers tell us about the beliefs of the Pendle women? First, it suggests that they thought people and things could be 'bewitched', and that harm thus caused could be put right by reciting prayers, rather than applying medical remedies. This view puts witchcraft firmly on the supernatural plain, to be fought spiritually not physically.

Secondly, it suggests that they were much influenced by roman catholic christianity. Catholic Mass had been openly celebrated in Lancashire in the not-so-distant

times of Queen Mary, and was still widely performed by priests hiding in Pendle and elsewhere under Elizabeth 1 and James 1. The latin words would be incomprehensible to Elizabeth Device, but she would have heard them repeated many times. They were (in the first prayer at least), probably accompanied by the priest making the sign of the cross, which was regarded by many Lancas-



Judy Stevens

trians well into the 17th century as a very potent charm or blessing.

The second prayer I cannot interpret, but it sounds as though the woman was scolding the bad beer for being more bitter than an evil tongue, and imposing a penance, as the priest would do when she was confessed. The reference to latin prayers of penance at the end is unmistakable.



The third suggests the kind of rhymes a country chapel catechist might have used to teach christianity to peasant children. Catechism class was something all children were supposed to go through when Anne Whittle and Elizabeth Southernes were young, before the Reformation and the split with Rome. There was a papal decree that no-one who could not recite the Creed in life might be buried in hallowed ground. The 'petty school' classes took place in the local church and were attended by boys and girls alike. As in a Koranic school today, teaching consisted in chanting what was to be learnt; it was unlikely that anyone there could read.

Religion in the north of England

Apart from a few shreds of dogma and the Mass they attended in church, many country people in the north of England were very ignorant of christian teaching. There is one story of an old man in Cartmel, Cumberland, who was approached by a visiting missionary preacher at the end of the 16th century. When asked what he knew about the saving power of Jesus, the man replied:

I think I have heard of that man you spake of once in a play at Kendal called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree and blood ran down.⁸

Though not typical, this illustrates the level of awareness that people in remote areas could have about the 'established religion'. This does not mean that they were unaffected by it, only that their understanding of theology was limited. In fact the people of Lancashire clung stubbornly to 'the old faith' long after the protestant Reformation, and this was as true of women as men. In 1578 the Bishop of Chester granted a midwifery license to Jane Scarisbrick, on condition that she did not refuse to attend the wives of ministers. She obviously continued to find the idea of married priests shocking.

It would seem that the prayers of the accused women were to them words of power, taken from the most impressive religious organisation with which they had ever been in contact — the roman catholic church. To use prayers against witchcraft was to acknowledge the supernatural source of the power which 'bewitched', this does not go well with the idea of the 'witch' as scientist. To use christian invocations hardly suggests that these women were in conscious opposition to the Church.

Medical science or magic charms?

Looking at the healing activities of the defendants in this case, they do not appear to have been particularly skillful or beneficial. They seem to have relied more heavily, or more consciously, on supernatural agencies than any medical science. It is significant that none of the women seem to have denied the Devil's part in incidents such as that of a dog biting a cow which then went mad and died, or of another dog which bit Anne Whittle, making her "starke mad for the space of

eight weeks". It is easy now to diagnose these as probable rabies cases, as it is to see John Law's sudden paralysis being caused by a stroke. I do not suggest that the women should have known this, but how far could a system of medical practice be in advance of the 'male' doctors, if it was based on a similar belief that illnesses such as these were caused by evil spirits?

Ehrenreich and English say of the witch that:

She relied on her senses rather than on faith or doctrine, she believed in trial and error, cause and effect. Her attitude was not religiously passive, but actively enquiring.

In the Pendle witch case there is no evidence of the accused having pursued an experimental scientific method. On the contrary, a value seems to have been placed by them on old forms of words and practices passed down to them. 'Cause and effect' were judged according to the common wisdom of their day, and thus sudden illness or death were seen as the work of evil spirits, probably directed by the malice of a witch.

A rivalry is often supposed between women in whom the healing skill of the community lay, and the emerging male medical profession. Ehrenreich and English, among others, suggest that this led to such women being persecuted as witches by jealous doctors. In this case it is difficult to find any evidence of such rivalry. There had been a tradition of charitable care for the sick by monks at Sawley and Whalley Abbeys, and at Clitheroe Leper Hospital, (probably a more general hospice than its name suggests), until the 1530s. The medieval hospital was not a centre of medical practice as we understand it however, but a shelter where the sick could recover or die in peace. Most of the 'treatment' consisted in regular prayers by patients and staff. This is interesting in view of the strongly religious element in the prayers of the Pendle women. It is possible that they refer back to this old tradition of sick care.

It seems unlikely that at the time of the witch trials any doctor would have wished to practice in Pendle. It was amongst the poorest regions in the country; an impassable wilderness, without many rich potential patients, and far from the Court circles

where fame and fortune could be gained. The Pendle women certainly did not make much out of their healing activities, most of them lived in the most abject poverty.

In 1677 a vicar from Clitheroe on the edge of Pendle Forest, called John Webster, wrote a book: *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft*. He makes the following comments on the state of medical knowledge there, 65 years after the Pendle witch trial:

We ourselves have practiced the art of medicine in the north of England, where ignorance, popery, and superstition abound, and where the common people, if they chance to have any sort of epilepsy, palsy, convulsion or the like do persuade themselves that they are bewitched. If you should by plain reason show them that they are deceived they account you a physician of small value. But if you indulge their fancy, or hang any insignificant thing around their necks, assuring them it is the most efficacious and wonderful charm, you may settle their imaginations, then give them what is proper to eradicate the disease. And so you may cure them, as we have done in great numbers.

For it is here in the North country, where our figure flingers and pretended conjurers, piss prophets and water witches, that if they hit once it is cried up and told everywhere, but if they err an hundred times, it is soon buried in silence and oblivion. We call them wisemen and wisewomen, without regard to the ways and means by which they find stolen goods, or help men or animals thought to be bewitched.⁹

This passage clearly shows that people were still resorting to 'witches', and yet by this time there were far fewer trials and executions than under James 1. It also shows at least one amateur doctor and professional christian at the end of the 17th century did not consider witchcraft, though widely practiced, to be a threat to his own activities. Professional jealousy may have played a part in bringing about the witch persecutions, but it will not provide a blanket explanation for the motives of prosecutors in every case.

I would suggest that the case of the Pendle women shows that medical skills were not always a factor in witch persecutions. In this case at least we have to look elsewhere to discover why representatives of the state decided to mount a witchcraft show-trial at this particular time and place.

The 'crime' of women like the Pendle 'witches' was not any superior healing ability, but a view of life which did not fit the government line. □

1. Thomas Potts, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (1613). Reprinted in G.B. Harrison, *The trial of the Lancashire Witches* (1929).
2. Walter Bennet, *The Pendle Witches* (1957).
3. Matilda J. Gage, *Woman, Church and State* (1893) — quoted in Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978).
4. Barbara Ehrenreich and Dieder English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses. A History of Women Healers* (Readers and Writers, 1973).
5. Penny Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, *The Wise Wound* (1978), Ch. VI.
6. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) p193.
7. Thomas Potts, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches . . .* (1613).
8. Quoted in C. Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (1975).
9. John Webster, *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* (1677) — quoted in E. Peel, *The Trials of the Lancashire Witches* (1969).

Enemies of God or victims of patriarchy?

A discussion of Christina Larner, Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland (Chatto and Windus, 1981), in which Lynnette Mitchell talks about the evil image of women under christianity, and takes on a few more feminist myths about witches. Were there ever actual witch cults? And how many women really died?

Feminists who wish to have their ideas about the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries informed by historical fact (rather than the mythologising fantasies of those who follow Margaret Murray¹) will welcome Christina Larner's thoroughly-documented book, which could be seen as a sequel to Norman Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons*². In chapter six ('The Non-existent Society of Witches') of that excellent work, Cohn finally demolished the bizarre theories of Murray, which have had so unfortunate an influence on much feminist discussion of the witch-hunts. Murray's argument was this: 'witchcraft' was actually a pagan religion far older than Christianity whose god was a two-faced, horned fertility/vegetation deity called Dianus or Janus. The 'covens' of this cult consisted of thirteen members, which met at 'esbats' (weekly meetings) or 'sabbats' (larger assemblies).

This carefully (not to mention dishonestly) constructed thesis was destroyed by Cohn when he examined the original sources Murray used as 'proof'. By selective quotation she had sought to establish that the 'confessions' of accused 'witches' were sober, plausible accounts of meetings that actually happened. However, when the *complete* passages used by Murray are examined, they prove to contain the most unreal and fantastic supernatural happenings anyone could imagine. In other words, Murray suppressed the details in her primary sources which would show that the meetings described could never have happened. (And let us not forget that a large majority of the 'confessions' were wrung from the women concerned after terrible tortures³.) Murray's

disciples in the WLM are therefore basing their beliefs on a discredited set of ideas which have no historical validity.

Witch-hunting, Woman-hunting

If there weren't actual witch cults, the first and perhaps most important question to be asked by an feminist interested in this subject is: was witch-hunting in fact a synonym for woman-hunting, ie were the witches persecuted for being female in a male-dominant society rather than devil-worshippers in a Christian society? Throughout the book Christina Larner maintains that "while witch-hunting involves woman-hunting the link is indirect and the two cannot be completely identified" (page 197) and suggests that the witch-hunt was "sex-related" rather than "sex-specific" ie, although witch-hunting and woman-hunting are connected, the relationship is one degree removed. Witches were hunted as ideological deviants from patriarchal Christianity but not specifically because they were biologically female.

I am not so convinced on this point. For example, Christina Larner writes that the stereotype of the witch as female rests on the twin pillars of the Aristotelean view of women as imperfectly human and the Judeo-Christian view of women as the primary source of sin, without apparently realising that only in a deeply misogynistic society — one based on the hatred of women as women — would any such views arise in the first place. She herself (on page 93) draws attention to men's fear of menstruating women as having strange and dangerous powers. She also admits (page 94) that "in some periods the words women and witch

were almost interchangeable". In 12th century Russia the witch-hunting authorities simply rounded up the female population; in Langedorf in 1492 they charged all but two of the adult female population; on page 197 we find this sentence — "There were periods in 1649 and 1661 when no mature woman in Fife or East Lothian can have felt free from the fear of accusation."

Men: evil only by association

One factor which undoubtedly does militate against the total identification of the witch as female victim of male supremacy is the small but significant number of men accused of being witches. Christina Larner states the percentage as about 20%, or one-fifth of the whole. However, even here an interesting fact is that, of the Scottish male suspects whose identity has been pursued, apart from the men who were either notorious villains or 'cunning men' (practitioners of white witchcraft), all have turned out to be related to a *female* suspect, as husband or brother. From a feminist viewpoint, this piece of information is vital. I would contend that its meaning is as follows: the evil of female witches was seen to come from *within* themselves; it was due to their innate female sinfulness. Since no male could possess such innate female malignance, the evil of male witches came to them from *outside* themselves. Its source was, in fact, the female evil of their wives, sisters and so on. In order to avoid being suspected themselves, many husbands joined with their wives' accusers to give weight to their testimonies. Apart from saving their own skins, this was, of course, a good way of ridding themselves of an unwanted spouse.

Although I totally reject the baseless Murrayite theory that witches were part of an organised pre-Christian fertility religion, and am highly sceptical of some feminist claims that all women accused of being witches were rebels against the patriarchal order — the 'proto-feminist' theory — I also believe that the relationship between male hatred of women as women and patriarchal Christian hatred of witches as the embodiment of evil is somewhat more direct than Christina Larner would have it. Although there were many men who were executed by the Church for heresy, men have never felt threatened by the wrath of established Christianity *as a sex*. That is, although men

died at the stake for being religious dissidents, homosexuals or Jews (to name but three categories), 'innocent' men guiltless of any theological crime had no reason to fear for their lives. Woman's case was quite different. Notwithstanding Christianity's notorious hatred of all flesh, it is women's bodies/sexualities which have earned its particular animosity. All women have traditionally been seen by theologians as intrinsically evil due to our 'unclean' bodies, and therefore ripe for seduction by the devil's lures. This has never been true for men, who represent the norm and standard that women can only fail to reach because of 'natural' inferiority. This is the crucial point Christina Larner, as I understand from her, fails to grasp.

The other salient question for feminists on the subject of the witch-hunt is: how many women were, in fact, executed? Here Christina Larner makes it absolutely clear that we will never know the exact number of victims. Too many records are missing that will never be recovered, and in addition what records do exist are, for the most part, frustratingly vague — for example, many merely refer to 'many witches' in the case of multiple trials. In addition to our ignorance about how many witches were condemned and executed, Christina Larner points out that very many of the accused women died in prison through suicide or death caused by torture, brutality, neglect or starvation. One extremely important point is that, because of the highly episodic nature of witch-hunting, (nowhere did witch persecutions take place at a steady level, but rather came and went in waves), the extrapolation of probabilities from the figures which do exist can give no realistic estimation of the victims involved. Although precise, if rounded, figures were liberally offered in the past for the numbers executed, it is vital to realise that these figures (which run into hundreds of thousands) are now regarded by serious researchers as considerable exaggerations.

This is something feminists would do well to remember. I have read the most fantastically inflated statistics of witch-hunt victims in all sorts of feminist journals, magazines and books. One random example comes from a poem entitled 'Witch-Hunt', by Jenny Oliver in *Spare Rib* 130 (May 1983): "and they burned 100 thousand a year or

more for 3 hundred years did men". I once made the mistake myself of referring to "hundreds of thousands" of women in an article about witchcraft. I now realise such figures are quite misleading. Even worse is the attribution of *nine million* victims which is flung about in feminist discussions of witchcraft with wild abandon, although where it comes from, nobody knows.

Woman as victim?

The number of women who are determined to continue quoting, and apparently believing in, these absurd statistics is a distinct phenomena in itself, and a sinister one at that. There seem to be too many women in the Women's Liberation Movement who are attracted to the thought of hundred upon hundreds of thousands, or even million upon millions of women being burnt as martyrs/victims (whichever you like) to the Moloch⁴ of patriarchy. Such total identification of the concept 'woman' with the concept 'victim', with its clear corollary that a female who refuses victimisation is not a woman, is profoundly anti-feminist in its dangerous glorification of traditional 'feminine' masochism.

The roots of this phenomenon are deep and complex, but I believe part of the answer lies in the extent to which the 'collective unconscious' of the WLM (if I may be forgiven for using such a suspiciously Jungian phrase!) is still profoundly 'feminine'. All women, including we feminists, come to adulthood in a patriarchal society which structures the sexuality and psychology of its members from birth. The masochism of women is, alas, not merely a patriarchal myth but a patriarchal reality insofar as most women, to some degree or other, conform to a stereotype of conventional femininity which does include masochism as one of its components. I submit (no pun intended!) that in a patriarchal society the majority of women are, to varying extents, masochists who 'complement' the sadism of conventional masculinity. Although we women have had our sexualities/psychologies determined by patriarchy through no fault of our own, it is surely wise to expose the ways in which these traits adversely influence feminist analysis and theory; and I believe this to have been the case with some theories about witchcraft.

Martyrs and masochism

I realise the above argument could be regarded as controversial: in its defence I would point to the emergence of lesbian 'sado-masochism'. It is highly significant that the devotees of this appalling, sexually fascistic cult openly admit that there are far more lesbian masochists than sadists. Neither lesbianism nor feminism necessarily saves a woman from conforming to patriarchal sexual constructs. The link between the glorification of witches as suffering female martyrs and masochistic eroticism was made clear by the feminist writer Marina Warner in a Channel 4 programme about Joan of Arc, who was herself burnt as a witch. She pointed out that in the many films made about Joan, the actress playing the part is bound to the stake with far more rope than was practically necessary to physically secure her; that the camera lingers on her ecstatically suffering face as she burns; and that these images of a woman bound and chained relate directly to sado-masochistic pornography.

Lastly, a note about another unproven feminist theory: that many witches were burnt because they were sexually independent women: widows, spinsters and/or lesbians. Quite apart from the fact that our contemporary concepts of 'heterosexuality' and 'lesbianism' would not have been understood in their modern significance in the 16th and 17th centuries, the records do not mention sexual orientation as an identifying factor. However, in the records for marital status that do exist, about half of the accused women were married. They were poor, not because they were single women with no male to provide for them, but because they had impoverished husbands. There is no evidence to suggest that women were accused of witchcraft because they were living without men: a far higher proportion of the female population were single or widowed at that time than in contemporary society, in any case.

Christina Larner's book will undoubtedly be the major source of analysis about the witch-hunts for many years, and may prove to be definitive. It should be required reading for all feminists who are at all interested in the witch-hunt as historical reality, and will hopefully serve in future as a counter-blast to fantasising on the subject. □



For 'thrill-seeking females' only

Continuing our series which looks again at writings that have been important to us, Jayne Egerton takes on one of the most notorious feminist declarations of war — Valerie Solanas' *Scum Manifesto*. We are happy that this review marks the reissue of *Scum*, after long years as a collectors' item only.

I first read the *Scum Manifesto* many years ago when I was a 'humanist' feminist. It was with some surprise that I found myself sneakily revelling in its ruthlessly anti-male sentiments whilst knowing them to be so obviously 'unfair'. It seems to me that *Scum* speaks on some level to all women however they might identify politically. It's not addressed to the right-on feminist alone but to any woman who has felt, if only momentarily, a passionate hatred of the man-made world and a yearning for something better.

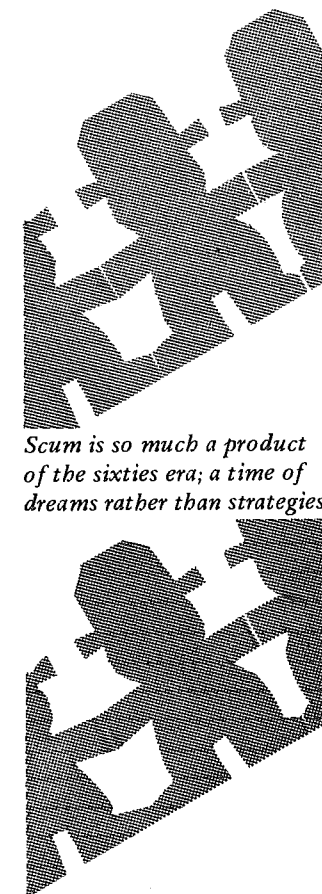
Scum is not a sober, reasonably argued programme for political change. It's a racy, hot-tempered outburst of rage against men. Reading it now, it seems unlikely that Solanas intended it to be read as a literal recommendation of what women should do next. The glorious, anarchist vision of how women will gain control is hopelessly naive and utopian, but perhaps that is because *Scum* is so much a product of the sixties era; a time of dreams rather than strategies. The fact that *Scum* is choc-a-bloc with sixties American slang also gives it a dated, anachronistic feel. But in spite of these reservations I do feel *Scum* marked a radical departure in feminist thought. It contains many valuable insights which were to be developed and elaborated on when the second wave of feminism truly took off.

(It should be remembered that Solanas wrote *Scum* in 1967 before the advent of the Women's Liberation Movement).

Scum's basic contention is that men have created a "shitpile of a world" in order to "compensate for not being female". In the opening passage Solanas states that the male is a "walking abortion" since the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene. Men's crimes and inadequacies, according to Solanas, are therefore due to men being "incomplete females". Ultimately then, men must be eliminated since they are unreformable. Solanas longs to sweep away the male sex along with all the horror and misery he has created:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

Scum argues that men are trapped within their own egos and incapable of empathising with anyone else. Your average man is "a half dead, unresponsive lump" who needs to spend as much time in female company as possible to "complete" himself and must claim female qualities of "dynamism . . . vitality. . . grooviness (sic). . ." as his own whilst projecting all the weak, unattractive male qualities on to women. Contrary to



Scum is so much a product of the sixties era; a time of dreams rather than strategies.

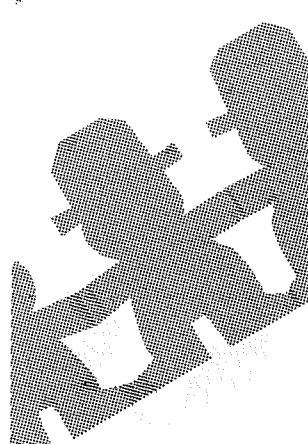
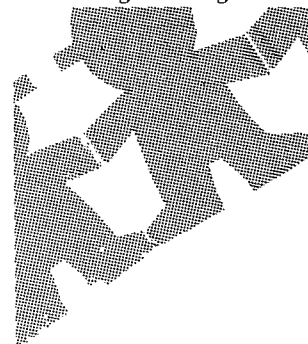
1. Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (OUP 1962, originally published 1921).

2. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (Heinemann 1975, also a Paladin paperback).

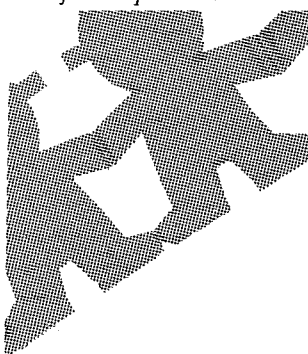
3. Torture was legal in Scotland, as on the continent, but not in England and Wales; probably for this reason the English witch-hunt was, in all its aspects, far less widespread and savage than elsewhere.

4. Moloch was a Phoenician god whose worship demanded human sacrifice by fire.

If all the benefits of our society accrue to men, why aren't there more women demanding to change sex?



The left explain the nuclear arms build-up in terms of the needs of capital alone, they continue to leave masculinity out of the equation.



I believe, still, that it is vital for women to withdraw our unconditional support and love for men and to compel them to support each other.

what Freud thought about women suffering from penis envy, *Scum* informs us that it is men, in fact, who suffer from "pussy envy". Although I can't accept that the root of all patriarchal evil lies in men's envy of women, the fact that transvestism and transexuality are almost exclusively male phenomena does suggest that a surprising number of men do want to be women. If all the benefits of our society accrue to men, why aren't there more women demanding to change sex? Solanas is right about the existence of this envy but wrong to attribute it to men's inherent biological inferiority.

The idea that men are emotional leaches who drain women's energy runs throughout *Scum*. Solanas argues that men need to be serviced and nurtured within the home so that they can compete in the outside 'male world'. Unable to give emotionally themselves, they live parasitically off women's emotions, treating all women as mother substitutes. This observation may not seem very illuminating to contemporary feminists, we know it well. Certainly Solanas' description of the one-way channelling of emotion so characteristic of most male/female relationships anticipates the writings of radical feminists such as Phyllis Chesler and Adrienne Rich who have pleaded with women to force men to grow up by refusing to soothe all their pains, calm all their fears and care for them at the expense of our integrity and energy. I believe, still, that it is vital for women to withdraw our unconditional support and love for men and to compel them to support each other. Some of us had hoped that one benefit of 'anti-sexist' men's groups would be that they'd take the burden of supporting men off women's shoulders. I recall one anti-sexist man whining to me that his group couldn't fulfil this function as he couldn't stand men. (Join the club I thought!) Solanas would not have been surprised, given her own acute observation: "Men expect women to adore what men shrink from in horror — themselves".

A large part of the manifesto is taken up with descriptions of the activities and ideologies which men have been compelled to invent to compensate for not being women. Her comments on war and masculinity are

as relevant today as they were then — if anything, more urgency is imparted to them by the continuing escalation of the arms race. Solanas claims that men's routine proof of manhood is through sex but this is not proof on a large enough scale so they create wars in which to get their "Big Gun off". The connections between male sexuality and war are still being explored by feminists today. The left explain the nuclear arms build-up in terms of the needs of capital alone, they continue to leave masculinity out of the equation.

The tedious, uncreative money/work system is explained in *Scum* as deriving from men's inability to live with their maleness. They try to give themselves "the delusion of usefulness" by filling every moment with boring work rather than being forced to contemplate their own "grotesque" selves. Women are denied the opportunity for doing meaningful, creative work so they tend to fritter away their time with trivia or attempt to 'make it' on male terms as "co-managers of the shitpile".

Solanas is implacably opposed to reformist feminism that aims to give privileged women a bigger share of the patriarchal pie.

What will liberate women, therefore, from male control is the total elimination of the money/work system, not the attainment of economic equality with men within it. So, for Solanas "the male rebel is a farce", a contradiction in terms given that men created the world for themselves and so have nothing to rebel against other than their maleness itself. The seventies were to see the exodus of many women from left organisations who confirmed Solanas' claim that male radical politics were often little more than power struggles amongst different groups of men.

Solanas reserves some of her most vitriolic contempt for "Great Art" and "Culture". Having created a bleak, boring, loveless world we are offered these "paltry" substitutes for real life. As men are empty creatures with nothing to communicate, their 'art' is little more than an elaborate con trick. We are bombarded with "pompous dissertations on the beauty of this and that turd". Male artists, according to Solanas, create obscure, incomprehensible works which purport to be "deep" but are, in truth, empty. Most people learn to be

respectful of authority and incapable of forming their own opinions. Solanas believes this to be particularly true of "Daddy's Girls". "Daddy knows best" is translated into "Critic knows best" and "PhD knows best". "Male art" also has a further function of supposedly confirming the superiority of the male. Solanas' attempted assassination of Andy Warhol rather than any other "male great" makes perfect sense to me after reading *Scum*. Who else symbolised self-indulgent, pretentious, male, capitalist art to the extent that he did in the last decade? He was also an obvious target since the Warhol bandwagon carried many a drug-addicted, sexually exploited, 'disposable' woman on it, some of whom are no longer alive.

Having taken us for a lightening conducted tour through the male world, *Scum* builds up to its conclusion. Solanas believes men's days to be numbered since they are self-destructive creatures. Consequently it is only sensible for the "Scum girls" to speed up this historical inevitability. *Scum* states that men have no right to life as they are a lesser life form than women. It is here that Solanas makes some offensive equations between maleness, and disabilities such as blindness which I think today's feminists would be horrified by. Solanas sees the possibility of breeding men out of existence as the advent of reproductive technology will make the male expendable. She believes in the necessity of test-tube births not only because they herald a male-free world but also because she sees human reproduction as intrinsically oppressive to women. The idea of technology as the liberator of women was, of course, to be most popularised by Shulamith Firestone. Personally I don't know any feminist who sees either the destruction of men or test-tube births as feasible or desirable solutions to women's oppression.

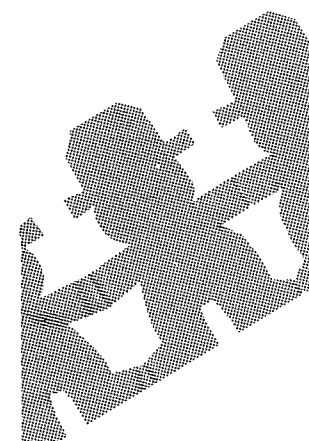
Scum girls will employ a variety of tactics to overthrow male power: they will become members of the "unwork" force, taking jobs only to fuck them up; they will burst into heterosexual couples and break them up (couple-busting); they will pick-off and kill certain relevant male targets. Solanas acknowledges that not all women are going to leap enthusiastically to join

Scum at first, but cannot be bothered to wait around until all women are "debrained-washed". In this sense *Scum* is as unashamedly vanguardist as it is female supremacist. Scum girls are the coolest, grooviest, most enlightened females whereas many other women are "toadies and doormats". In fact, there are quite a number of other anti-woman statements in *Scum* aimed at those women who supposedly perpetuate their own oppression. This seems to me to be a very nasty form of victim-blaming and is the least appealing aspect of *Scum*.

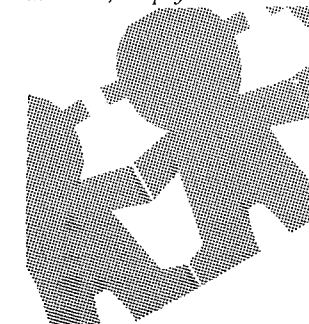
Finally, the organisation *Scum* will be in a position to plan the "agenda for eternity and Utopia" and no more men will have to be killed once women wake up to men's "banality and uselessness". Society will be automated and the tedium of work will be replaced by endless creative leisure. Some of the conclusions seem like little more than fanciful projections with no basis in material reality, but it is interesting to see how much *Scum*'s views on the promise of technology have in common with contemporary humanist, socialist ones.

It is hard to do justice to the savage, irreverent humour of *Scum* in a review without reproducing large chunks of the text. Writing this I'm aware of how colourless and tepid it seems in comparison with *Scum* itself. So, I'd recommend anyone who has not read it so far to rush out and buy a copy (maybe the salesgirls won't charge you...)

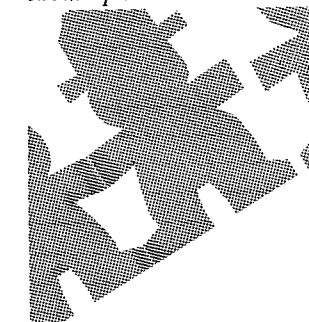
Scum is not a consistent, methodical analysis of patriarchal power and can be faulted on innumerable grounds. It fails to do more than fleetingly consider many aspects of women's oppression; it is openly biological determinist; its tongue-in-cheek outrageousness invites dismissal by the reader; it is an ethnocentric (US) view of patriarchy, uncomplicated by any mention of the Third World; and it offers fantasy in place of serious feminist strategy... That said, I think it is nevertheless a significant piece of feminist writing. I'm sure that its reissue will mean a whole new generation of women will be reading it and finding it a refreshing antidote to both the scholarly, sleep-inducing style of much academic feminist writing and to the kind of feminism which would have us sweet talk and therapise men out of their nasty ways. □



male artists... create obscure, incomprehensible works which purport to be "deep" but are, in truth, empty.



Scum girls will employ a variety of tactics to overthrow male power: they will become members of the "unwork" force, taking jobs only to fuck them up...



Scum Manifesto published by The Matriarchy Study Group, c/o 190 Upper Street, London N1. Price £1.50.



WHAT'S THE FRENCH FOR POLITICAL LESBIAN?

Arguments about lesbianism and the women's liberation movement have flared up in various countries at various times. In France a major conflict developed in 1980-81 when one group in Paris began to argue forcefully that no feminist could continue to love or sleep with men because this was collaboration with women's sex-class enemies. They believed all feminists should be lesbians, and they insisted that (lesbian) feminists should stop working politically with heterosexual women.

In Britain similar issues were debated on at least two occasions in the 1970s, but looking at the situation in another country, especially one where the lines of argument were sharply drawn, helps us see the issue as a whole more clearly. Claire Duchon therefore outlines the background to the events in France and presents translations of some key papers.

In 1980, the collective of the French radical feminist journal *Questions Feministes (QF)* split over the issue of "radical lesbianism" (*lesbianisme radical*). The debate that provoked and surrounded the split concerned the whole French Women's Liberation Movement (the *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes*, or MLF). It's hard to explain why the arguments were so bitter and violent. I can only make a few suggestions which link this quarrel to the internal evolution of the MLF and to the relationship between the MLF and the Left.

Since the early days of the MLF in 1970 or so, there have been markedly different styles of action and divergent ideas about both strategy and goals within it. But from a situation where differences were

accepted with a certain degree of mutual tolerance, there soon developed a series of conflicts which began to seem impossible to resolve. Three "tendencies" emerged and dominated the MLF — although it must be stressed that being part of one of these tendencies was not essential for defining oneself as a feminist and so they do not account for all women's experience in the movement.

First, there were the women who called themselves *Feministes Revolutionnaires*, and later *feministes radicales* (radical feminists), identifying men as the main enemy and engaging in actions designed to startle or shock the public and give the MLF a public existence. They insisted on the women-only nature of the MLF and refused to work either

with men or with institutions, distrusting both profoundly. The women involved in this type of feminism worked in ways familiar to British and other feminists — setting up small collectives and consciousness-raising groups, establishing newsletters and cafes, etc, and coming together to organise larger events, such as a three day conference on violence against women or a demonstration against the abortion law.

There were also women who continued to identify capitalism as the main enemy and who saw women's struggle as integral to the class struggle. They wanted to remain inside their "mixed" revolutionary organisations as well as to participate in the MLF, and they developed a difficult and ambivalent relationship with both, trying to walk a political tightrope between allegiance to women and allegiance to the working class. The women involved in the class struggle tendency (*Tendance Lutte des Classes*) generally belonged to far left organisations rather than to the Socialist Party, and their militancy was like that of women in the International Marxist Group and the Socialist Workers' Party in Britain.

The third tendency was the well-known group *Psychanalyse et Politique*, or "Psych et Po", whose approach differed even more significantly (see Jill Lewis in *Spare Rib* no. 108, 1981). While it is impossible to describe the theoretical basis of Psych et Po's practice briefly, we can infer that their approach to the question of women's oppression and liberation is heavily dependent on the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. (See Stevi Jackson's article on "The Desire for Freud" in *Trouble and Strife* no 1.) Psych et Po has never put out any "statements of position" and any public statements they do make are only understandable if the reader has acquired the specialised vocabulary and concepts that the group uses. For Psych et Po, women's oppression — or the oppression of the feminine element in all of us — operates at the level of the unconscious, and specifically takes place through the resolution of the Oedipus complex by which the child enters language, culture and the Symbolic. The way to women's liberation is therefore to allow this feminine element to exist, which must be done through the work of psychoanalysis and understanding the

way that the masculine element controls the way we think, and works upon us through language.

Psych et Po have developed an exclusive practice, frequently presenting themselves as *the* MLF, and this culminated in their registration of the name and logo MLF as a trademark, thereby depriving all other women of the legal right to use the name. (Non-Psych et Po women are now obliged to call themselves "part of the non-registered MLF".)

For many years the various groups and tendencies were absorbed in their different types of theoretical reflection and actions, but repeated attempts were made to work together over particular issues or events. However, Psych et Po's inclusion caused constant problems among radical and non-aligned groups. They could not agree on how to deal with them; whether to accept them or formally to dissociate from them.

Clearly, a very fundamental conflict of approach prevented any real unity between the sectors. By this I mean a conflict in the whole way in which the groups conceived of the Women's Liberation Movement, its needs and its strategy.

Class struggle tendency women and Psych et Po women share a "closed" approach. That is, they see one basic factor as explaining all others. There is one original problem from which all others derive (vis capitalism or masculinity). They feel the need for, and desire, a coherent theory on which to base their practice, and a logic to thought and action. They have a clear goal and clear strategy. Those who participate in one of these groups must necessarily share its theoretical premises and accept group practices: there are no half measures.

Radical and non-aligned feminists, however, while attempting to construct a coherent theory of sex classes, have always participated in a more "open" approach, recognising the place of contradiction and dialogue, accepting that some issues and feelings escape logic — and that women have to get by in a difficult world. They believe this openness to differences and to understanding why women make the choices and behave as they do is one important way in which theory can advance.

Put simply, then, I think that the question of radical lesbianism probably didn't come to the fore in France until 1980 because Psych et Po was occupying centre stage and much energy was absorbed in fighting them. Internal dissent often remains unexplored while there are clearer enemies to be fighting, and it is only when outside threats subside that it emerges. The tension about Psych et Po calmed down when their behaviour made it clear, once and for all, that they could not be part of the MLF, and when it was also clear that their attempt to take over 'the MLF' hadn't fooled most women.

The conflict between radical feminists and radical lesbians was in considerable measure due to the establishment of radical lesbianism as another closed approach. The main events surrounding the conflict were as follows. In February 1980, *Questions Feministes* published two articles on the question of lesbianism and whether feminists can be heterosexual or not. This brought the issue to the surface. In June 1980, a newly formed group of radical lesbians from Jussieu in Paris called a meeting to discuss issues they felt were of particular relevance to lesbians, including homophobia in the MLF. At this meeting, some of those present openly expressed great hostility towards heterosexual women, whom they called "collaborators", and also towards lesbians who continued to associate with heterosexual women, who were termed "kapos". (In France, the word collaborator is heavy with resonance of Vichy and Nazi occupation, which makes it a term not used — and not taken — lightly. "Kapos" were the prisoners in the concentration camps who helped the guards — so the violence of this title needs no further comment.) This produced instant and dramatic polarization among those present at the meeting.

Shortly afterwards, a group of radical feminists in the town of Caen called a three day meeting, and, in the announcement of the meeting, they specifically excluded Psych et Po, class struggle tendency women and the radical lesbians from Jussieu, all of whom they called 'dogmatic'. It was this exclusion, and the battle for control of *Questions Feministes* which ensued, which triggered off the more general, movement-wide, debate on radical lesbianism.

The issues involved included questions of solidarity, of elitism, of dogmatism, of betrayal, of strategy, and of the politics of desire. Personal differences between women exploded, often for reasons even they didn't fully understand. But once the anger, as well as the theoretical differences, were out, it was impossible to continue as before, or even to continue at all.

I think the two most powerful fears of women involved in the MLF are the fear of co-option and the fear of dogma, both within and outside the movement. The experience of Psych et Po on the one hand, and of the Socialist Party on the other, has made the MLF even more wary about these dangers in recent years. Psych et Po claims to be *the* MLF; the Socialist Party claims to be feminist in outlook and has set up a Ministry for Women's Rights. The MLF is afraid that its basis in non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, open, unstructured practice and theory will leave it open to others to claim feminist "victories" for themselves and for others to take over the movement. Yet the desire to remain non-hierarchical and open is strong, is of central importance, and will not be relinquished.

The following translations are statements from various sides of the debate and reflect both the arguments and the atmosphere surrounding it. They are taken from collections in two journals, *La Revue d'en Face*, Spring 1981, and *Nouvelles Questions Feministes*, no 1, March 1981. Both magazines published a selection from the duplicated sheets circulating in the movement at the time and a number of full-length articles. From these, I have chosen first a handout from the meeting called by the Jussieu lesbians in June 1980, which is a position statement on radical lesbianism, and second an edited extract from an article by one of the collective of *La Revue d'en Face*, which is basically a radical feminist journal. Then follows a response by the radical lesbians to their exclusion from the radical feminist meeting in Caen, which their supporters distributed at this meeting (October 1980), and finally an edited extract from the editorial for the first issue of *Nouvelles Questions Feministes* (March 1981). □

The most easily accessible accounts of debates around this issue in Britain are *Love Your Enemy* (Onlywomen Press, 1981), and the papers from the conference on 'The WLM and Men' in Scarlet Friedman and Elizabeth Sarah (eds.): *On the Problem of Men*, (Women's Press, 1982). For an introduction to debates in the USA, see the articles by Charlotte Bunch and Lucia Valeska in *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from 'Quest'* (Longman, 1981).

Against Heteroppression

A handout distributed at the lesbian meeting in Paris on 21–22 June 1980.

Lesbianism. Perversion, anomaly, denial of castration, or so we are told at worst. But now our guilt and anxiety have gone and we have ended up laughing at them . . .

At best people say that lesbianism is a different sexuality, and we must make people recognise it as such: "Understand we are different and stop oppressing us". This is an intermediary position which we have taken in protecting ourselves under the large, reassuring umbrella of "homosexuality" . . .

A different sexuality? Really? A different desire? How can this difference be described? Where does it come from? From our individual backgrounds? From a historical accident? From Homo genes? From an irrepressible attachment to the mother or a conflict-ridden identification with the father? . . .

It comes from a society which we can easily describe: one which is patriarchal and heterosexual.

It comes from our society where the conflicts between the class of women and the class of men are so violent and so oppressive that it can only be called war; from our society, where, to make women comply with the oppressor, patriarchy invented the great Heterosexual Logic: ie men and women are complementary due to their sexual difference. Women must love men and perceive them not as they really are — as enemies — but as human beings. Men can then rape women with impunity: this is called sexual intercourse. They can own a woman, shut her up in a house and make her take care of them: this is called marriage. They can own a woman, keep her walking the streets and make her take care of them:

this is called prostitution. They can kill a woman: this is called a crime of passion. They can do whatever they like: this is called love, desire, sexuality. Above all, this is called Nature . . . Heterosexuality is a patriarchal strategy . . . It is hetero-power, hetero-sociality, hetero-strategy, heteroppression.

Women in our society take on a pseudo-identity. Dresses revealing legs, legs raised on stiletto heels, simpering, dependence, fragility, fear, seduction, anxious, haughty glances at rivals: this is called femininity. An identity totally based on destruction, painted with spots of insecurity. Bodies torn apart with pain, bodies to be carved up by patriarchal doctor-voyeurs, whose hands soothe, sustain, whose eyes watch, whose words are spoken in the name of the father: this is called motherhood. Pseudo-identity, pseudo-benefits. The only role women play is one of exchange object. They learn to be wary of other women. They learn to betray their own class for the benefit of the Others. It is hard to lose, this habit of "loving" the oppressor, of cutting oneself off from other women, of betraying them. It is a profoundly political situation for women: their collaboration in a nameless horror.

Lesbianism is resistance to this heteroppression. It is above all a practice of fundamental solidarity between women. All our emotional life is invested in women, for women, with women; we give no benefits to the oppressor. It is rejection of femininity — which is why they call us 'imitation men'. People say of lesbians that "They don't like men" as if they are depriving themselves of a tempting dessert. It's true, we don't like men. We refuse to

"humanise" the oppressor, to give him one ounce of our trust, or of our sensitivity. We will neither comply nor collaborate, for we know the cost: the loss of our life-forces and the betrayal of our class.

We have, all of us, at one time or another, collaborated with the oppressor, and some of us almost didn't get away. We are not talking about morality in an abstract way, but because we have counted the damage and the cost of "conforming", that is, the cost of being a "woman"...

All women must become lesbians, that is, gain solidarity, resist... and not collaborate. As long as Lesbianism is considered a different kind of sexuality, as long as "desire" is thought to come from an unknown impulse, the idea of Lesbianism as a political choice will seem unacceptable. Lesbianism is not something we can do, like tasting an exotic fruit ("I tried it but I didn't much care for it"), it is an alternative way of life. Sexuality and the possibility of desire come afterwards.

'Monique'

Hating Masculinity,

Extract from an article from the journal *La Revue d'En Face*, Spring 1981.

Is radical lesbianism (not to be confused with simple homosexual practice) both essential to, and enough for, the destruction of patriarchy? Monique Wittig seems to think that it is:

"lesbian" is the only concept I know that goes beyond sex categories (woman and man), because the subject (lesbian) is not, in economic, political or ideological terms, a woman. For in fact what makes a woman is a particular social relationship to a man, which we have called "servage" — a relationship which implies personal and physical obligations as well as economic obligations... a relationship from which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual.

This quotation reveals clearly both the illusory nature of separatism and the way in which it remains trapped within patriarchal discourse.

The belief that refusing all contact with men is enough to make a woman a "non-woman", as Wittig says, is not only an illusion, it is also in contradiction with the notion of sex-class. As long as there is a system which is founded on two totally distinct "sex classes", it will be impossible to step out of the class into which one was born. Society will continue to treat those who see themselves as "escapees" in exactly the same way as the others. Are lesbians safe from rape? From men's attempts to pick

them up? From discrimination at work? From sexist insults? No, of course not. Maybe they are less exposed to them, but as long as they live in a patriarchal society, "non-women" or not, they will be subjected to the same oppression as all women.

As for the private appropriation or ownership of individual women by individual men described by Wittig, you don't have to be a lesbian to escape it. It is true that egalitarian relationships between a woman and a man require a constant expenditure of energy, constant vigilance and a never-ending struggle against cultural inertia. It is also true that this struggle is all the harder to engage in because it requires great emotional investment, but this is not, as the radical lesbians think, purely emotional *dependence*. The struggle is active, involving the construction and deconstruction of complex and ambivalent relationships...

The text *On Collaboration* suggests heterosexuality "depoliticizes the men/women antagonism, by individualising and 'humanising' relations of oppression". Funny way to conceive of our old slogan "the personal is political" when, from this perspective, it ought to read "there is no personal, only political." The radical lesbians reduce the personal to the political in the same way as patriarchy reduces the political to the personal, or as it denies the emotional dimension of the political. Feminists, on the

Not Men

contrary, affirm that the emotional and the political interact and affect each other, but neither can be reduced to the other.

The fact that all men, because of their sex, are in the position of oppressor does not mean that all male individuals *are nothing but oppressors* — anymore than we are *nothing but oppressed*. (If this were the case, we wouldn't even be able to fight.) It is because oppression *fails* to make us purely oppressors or purely oppressed that liberation is conceivable; and it is clearly more useful to pick out the system's faults than to inflate its victories...

This view of men clearly does not bring the Movement's women-only policy into question, for even if some totally non-phallocratic men did exist, they would still not share our female condition. Nor does it question the fact that today, whether they like it or not, all men benefit from patriarchy. But it does suggest particular individual men are not necessarily proponents of oppression nor propagandists for male chauvinism.

Some women say: you're deluding yourself. Men are incapable of change, because patriarchy is in their interests. OK, but what interests? Seemingly it's in their "objective" material interest and their social and psychological interest... But why give sexual oppression a status we deny other oppressions?

I am Western and socially-privileged. I have "objective" interests... in maintaining the oppression and exploitation of the Third World and the proletariat, from whom I derive benefits whether I like it or not. However, I am engaged in a struggle against imperialism, and for an egalitarian, self-managing society. Rather than feeling myself to be in a fanciful way "superior" by nature, I prefer, for the price of a few material advantages and a bit of prestige, to live in a world of fully-developed human beings, equal and free. This is *also* in my interest, and I regard it highly. I therefore do not see by what quirk of fate men should be different from me in this, by definition, and why they shouldn't end up — even if by a particularly long and difficult process — realising this interest by becoming anti-sexist for the same reasons as have made me an anti-racist. (And if they don't, we will never have a post-patriarchal society.)

I know that what I have just written exposes me to accusations of complacency or self-indulgence. I am however no less of a man-hater than the next woman; but my man-hating is directed at *masculinity*, and not at men. Or rather, at men according to the degree of their masculinity. That is, I take into account what they are socially. (At least one advantage of "heterosociality" is to allow us to see that our ten-year struggle has actually had some effect...)

The fact that there is a continuum between the slightest discrimination and the most extreme servitude does not mean that everything has equal weight. If we indulge in verbal inflation and equate flirtation with rape and fantasy with the act, we make rape less painful, and give arguments to men who can distance themselves from their phallographic practices by blaming the system. They can shrug off their guilt as active oppressors by assigning responsibility to the role they are given in patriarchal society. If they are called rapists when they have never raped anyone, why should they not do so? It's not their fault, "it's the system", it's sexual alienation, it's their education, etc. We know these arguments only too well. The only way to get men to change is to make them see their personal responsibility for the perpetuation of oppression, and to remove all ideological and material escape routes. To amalgamate everything goes against the very consciousness we should constantly be trying to invoke.

The radical lesbians seem to forget that the ending of oppression implies either that men are exterminated (which is unrealistic, even if it were desirable), or that they change completely. And feminism covers all the ways to achieve the latter goal. Excluding men from our struggle and from our space is one tactic and it has already begun to show its effectiveness, notably by forcing a certain number of men to admit that it wasn't only the "system" which was oppressing us, but also them on a personal level, as agents of this system. It has also taught them there are other equally valid points of view, and destroyed many ideas they took for granted.

Ceasing all contact with men is a strategy whose value I don't doubt.

But confronting them every day, constantly showing them the ways in which they are oppressive, changing power relations by gaining our freedom not only apart from them but in front of them, forcing them more and more to recognise in each of us that women are people and not objects, destroying their interest in maintaining their privileges by making sure that they receive more injuries than advantages from

them — this is not "collaboration". It is a daily struggle, even if this struggle is permeated by emotions (and all struggles are, I think, in a thousand ways). It is the heterosexual, heterosocial form of the feminist struggle . . .

Radical lesbians talk about all of this in terms of resistance, collaboration and Kapos.

They don't analyse actual sexual oppression in its complexity and its specificity, and

Pulling Up

Leaflet distributed at Caen, October 1980.

The group of radical lesbians known as 'the Jussieu Lesbians' have been excluded from a "radical feminist" meeting. The leaflet advertising this meeting nevertheless claims to avoid pre-established definitions; to base its practice on a "theory of sex classes"; not to want to "set out a correct political line"; to think that the "interplay of contradictions is one of the Movement's most positive aspects"; to want to "end the isolation and the fragility which drain our energies"; and last but not least, to want to distinguish between "radical feminism and reformist feminism".

Our exclusion from this meeting essentially means that radical lesbians — whose goal is to fight the oppression of women as a class by men as a class — are thought of in the same way as antifeminist groups such as: Psych et Po, whose practice of unjustifiable appropriation and immobilising theories of "feminitude" do not need to be described here, groups in the "class struggle tendency", who, because of their fondness for class struggle theory and their collaboration with mixed political groups, relegate the struggle against patriarchy to secondary status.

What have the Jussieu lesbians done that is so awful that they "deserve" to be

they therefore have to replace a concrete reality — which doesn't fit into their scheme — with ideas from their imaginations. Rather than bringing our own history to light, they fit women into the stories of other peoples' oppressions. Since their theory is not derived from us, it brings us nothing we can use in our struggle for our own liberation. This is why it must be criticised.

On the other hand they are correct to

point out that lesbianism upsets ideas of the complementarity of the sexes and it is essential feminists not only demand the right to be lesbian . . . but also make it possible for women's homosexual desires to come to light. It is in feminists' interests, whoever they are, to show disorder, in every possible way, in sex categories which serve as legitimization for the oppressive division of individuals . . .

Marie-Jo Dbavernas

The Roots

included in such a politically bizarre group?

According to the leaflet announcing the Caen radical feminist meeting, radical lesbians from Jussieu were in the wrong to be an "organised" and "dogmatic" group. But since when have the attempts to construct coherent theory and practice, and to make things clear, necessarily produced "dogma"? Contained in this reproach is the old fear of theory and coherence which has for so long plunged the feminist movement into a preference for the unclear and the spontaneous. To make suggestions about our struggle and our campaigns — which implies clarifying the nature of our political involvement and giving it a theoretical basis — which in turn implies analysing concepts and *developing new concepts* — does not mean that these are "dogma" or the "correct political line". It means they form the very foundation for a radical struggle, which precisely is *not dogmatic*.

This reproach is coupled with the same political accusation as has been applied for several months in order to *avoid the heart of the debate*. The Jussieu lesbians are said to have "broken their solidarity with the Movement by their dogmatism and by their existence as a monolithic group, especially on 21/22 June in Paris." However at that *lesbian meeting*, which we ourselves called, we found a huge number of "homosexual women" who

refused all the discussions based on papers which we proposed, and who concentrated only on the *posters* that certain lesbians — who weren't from Jussieu (Jussieu doesn't have a monopoly on radical lesbianism) — had put on the walls. These posters made political attacks on heterosexual women and on "shameful" lesbians, described respectively as patriarchy's "collaborators" and "kapos". The debate focused on the "poor old heteros". We were traitors, monsters, rubbish. We didn't respect anything, not even the Second World War. (But what about *our* war? Who among us really takes it seriously?)

We, the radical lesbians from the Jussieu group and from other groups, wanted to talk about such questions as:

— why did lesbians hide in the MLF, which they founded originally, and keep quiet about their lesbianism?

— How can we find ways to discuss the concepts of oppression and resistance which will take us out of the inertia caused by the "victim mentality"?

— How can we start to form networks of alternative lifestyles through which we can defend our interests as lesbians?

— How can we re-pose the question of political involvement now that we see radical lesbianism as a political position and heterosexuality as a patriarchal strategy?

— How can we organise our offensive against the class of men, without expecting a Great Revolution will solve it for us?
— Etc.

As radical lesbians . . . at the meeting, we didn't want either to trade insults or to exclude anyone. (We didn't keep anyone out of our meeting.) But we *did* want to discuss the problem — vital for us — of collaboration with the oppressor.

Our aim has always been to take the theory of sex classes . . . to its logical conclusion and to contribute to the destruction of the opposition between the public and the private. These form the theoretical premises of radical feminism and we fully support them. But we feel these premises are now being denied. In addition, we feel that these feminist theories are insufficient in themselves, because they do not account for the oppressive dimension of the hetero-social system (acting through heterosexuality), and because they do not extend to the issue of political commitment in our lives, here and now. Only radical lesbianism poses these questions and proposes that we explore them. This explains why it is rejected by feminists. We have not rejected sisterhood, as we have been accused of doing. We have been an active presence . . . in the Movement . . . However, we don't want sisterhood at any price. We feel that sisterhood is reached through questioning compromises, which is why we believe that heterosexuality acts against sisterhood, against class solidarity.

We think that it is of paramount importance to start up groups where we can defend our own political interests. We don't want to accommodate to heterosexuality (which we consider to be reformist), nor to stop our theoretical progress because our saying "all men are men, all men are rapists" it is supposedly going to upset heterosexual feminists. We don't want to hide our lesbianism any more, under the pretext that "it will frighten most women off" . . .

We want to fight all the violence — even the least evident — done to women and to build up our own spaces of resistance. Is this what is called lack of solidarity? Even when the time comes and we are really strong on our own ground, even when we have really established the theoretical

and practical basis, *the women only basis* of our struggle, we wouldn't dream of participating in so called 'general' struggles, which are only general in that they are mixed. We have to organise separately against our main enemy, which implies that we have an overall view of society. What we won't do is place ourselves "in a specific way, as feminists, within the context of a general struggle against the state, repression and all types of power-seeking". It is clear that this sort of interest in "general" struggles contradicts the feminist theory of sex classes, since, while the latter owes much to "class struggle analysis" it has itself developed into a global approach to society. Under the pretext of bringing the feminist point of view (weak and threatened as it is at the moment!) into "general" struggles, many feminists take part in demonstrations alongside men . . . or feel guilty for not so demonstrating. They "forget" however to take part in a demonstration against rape, which is a political crime against the class of women ('well, it's only of minor importance in these repressive times'), especially when the demonstration is organised by "dirty lesbians". And they refuse to support a radical lesbian demonstration. They give priority to mixed groups. Funny kind of radical feminism, that.

It is hardly surprising that lesbians are now coming forward, more determined than ever to reassert their intention to join together and make their political struggle more radical. It is because a whole faction of radical lesbians have called heterosexual women to account for their collaboration with our enemy that, you say, you excluded the Jussieu group from your meeting. We, however, think that this exclusion is a sign that radical feminism is dying: that it has been carefully co-opted. If so many lesbians have been involved in feminism, it is precisely because they could fight the oppressor through feminism. When the oppressor is no longer fought, lesbians leave, and call the others to account. And they find themselves excluded from the women's movement for "bad behaviour" and "insulting behaviour", even though the movement would never have existed in the first place without radical lesbians . . .

You have chosen Caen. It's comfortable,

sunny, reassuring, conformist in terms of morals, manners, decency. You can find your undogmatic coherence by choosing a scape-goat called Jussieu, because it's easier to point at and blame a few people, rather than to deal with the questions posed by radical lesbianism.

But you should at least have the decency not to talk about your rejection of prior judgements, your desire to soften radicalism with reformism (and what is your line on co-option?), your penchant for contradictions. Have the decency not to call us anti-feminist. Accept your exclusion of us for what it is: a fundamental lack of soli-

darity with lesbians, the most socially vulnerable, the most marginal, but also the women most irreconcilable with the class of oppressors. You apparently still expect something from the oppressors although you disguise this as a paternalistic defence of "heterosexual women".

Groups of radical lesbians are appearing or getting stronger everywhere. Through their practice and their theory, they are showing that a Movement of Radical Lesbians exists today. The exclusion you operate (a mix of power and fear) won't stop it from growing. On the contrary, it will strengthen it.

*Radical Lesbians of Jussieu
in the Radical Lesbian Movement*

A Movement For All Women

*Editorial from Nouvelle Questions
Feministes 1, March 1981.*

Exit *Questions Feministes*?
Not really, for here is *Nouvelles Questions Feministes*, whose aim is to continue the work that *Questions Feministes* did for three years. Let us make it clear: the change of title in no way indicates a change of direction or of content . . .

Questions Feministes succeeded in being what it set out to be: the place for theoretical debate which was so badly needed in the feminist movement . . . We therefore owe our readers, and the movement in general, an explanation for the split in our editorial collective; even though it's true to say that we don't fully understand it ourselves . . .

The *QF* collective split in June 1980 over the issue of the "radical lesbian" position put forward by a group which was then called "the Jussieu lesbians". Starting from a critique of heterosexuality as the site and the central means by which women are oppressed, this position ended up calling heterosexual women "collaborators" — a formulation which provoked violent arguments within the heart of the movement.

According to this position, if women and men constitute two antagonistic classes, it follows that all contact between the classes is "class collaboration", and for those of the oppressed class this is a betrayal of themselves.

One half of our old collective declared they were, on the whole, in solidarity with this position. The other half, ourselves, reacted against it strongly — or, more exactly, we reacted against the "conclusion". We felt it was incompatible with the principles of feminism and with the theoretical and political orientation of the journal. We believed the conclusion contradicted the premises of radical feminism: ie the recognition that women, all women, constitute an oppressed class; that we are all oppressed by men as a class; and that feminism is the struggle against this *common* oppression of all women. The term "collaborators" denotes political enemies, not those who share one's oppression, not allies. And collaborators cannot, by definition, at the same time be resisters, that is, feminists . . .

The two sides of the collective evaluated the role and importance of this "conclusion" very differently . . . For the other side, the critique of heterosexuality was the

On the International Women's Day demo. in March 1981 in Paris, radical lesbians marched as a group, and at a meeting the following day they called for the establishment of a Lesbian Front separate from the MLF. In June of the same year they organised a meeting from which they excluded "hetero-feminists (hetero or homosexual)" and which reaffirmed lesbianism as the sole logical and global struggle against men as a class.

base, while the condemnation of heterosexual women was a "form". They said they did not agree with it personally, but they refused to discuss it precisely because they said it was a problem about form and not about content . . . According to their logic, wanting to discuss the condemnation of heterosexual women was "making technical criticisms to avoid talking about the main point" . . .

1. A split therefore appeared in the very form of the discussion, which, although it was not over the "basic point", was just as serious in our eyes as the split over the definition of feminism. It was the problem of intellectual terrorism, and ultimately of totalitarian thinking. The "radical lesbians" presented their position *en bloc*. One might not criticise it. Either you were totally with them or totally against them . . . We refused to accept this type of argument, not only because it is specious, but, more seriously, because it is terrorism. Historically this way of thinking is well known. It generally justifies a totalitarian practice . . . But unfortunately it is not restricted to dominant groups or regimes in power. The Communist Party and far left groups also use similar arguments and totalitarian thought and intellectual terrorism . . . in so far as they can. And it is not a male prerogative either. We have seen a totalitarian system among women in this country with the Psych et Po group . . .

2. The logic of the "radical lesbian" position ends up with the purging of heterosexual women from the feminist ranks, as their texts actually explicitly say . . .

3. Since the simple exclusion of heterosexuals from the movement is obviously an impossible task, in reality their position means bringing a vanguard theory into feminism. [Lesbians are the most advanced feminists] . . .

4. . . . So what caused the split in *Questions Feministes*? For us, the internal history of our group and its personal conflicts, or roles, or power structure (as with every other group) provides the rest of the story. But, strangely enough, the other side denies these factors played any part in their actions in regard to us. They claim their actions were "purely political".

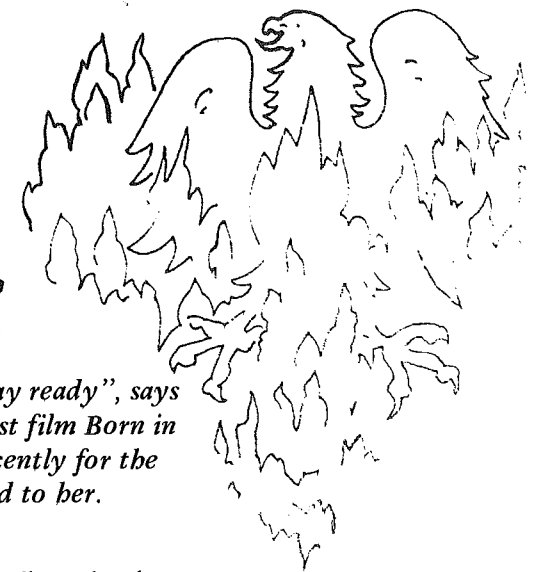
Even this denial rests, we think on a very different idea of the relationship between the personal and the political from ours . . . Three of the other side refused to discuss their personal lives within the group . . . We said that it would be extremely worrying individually, and a handicap from the point of view of consciousness-raising and theoretical analysis, if we discussed subjects like heterosexuality and lesbianism without reference to our "private lives" . . .

Their refusal to be open . . . reduced their politics to "the personal *should be* political". This is an insidious and extremely dangerous reversal of "the personal is political". Put differently, it means that "the political is not about analysis and strategy, it is about your personal life-style". Their politics started not from the personal, but with assertions about how one ought to live, with accusations which made women feel guilty if they didn't live up to the proposed ideal. They said and say that the ideal should and must, here and now, be made material in each individual feminists' life. They want to abolish the objective contradictions between women's ways of life and their politics, and to transform women's lives into "hard politics". They insist women's whole being should express the "correct line". Their aim was and is thus not to fight against oppression but to express non-oppression . . .

In 1977 (when *QF* was begun), of all points at issue, one did actually seem to us to be settled and agreed among the collective and not to be in need of further discussion. This was the thesis that women constitute a class. But we can now see that without agreement on other points, even the theory whose strategic implications were so clear . . . could be turned around, perverted in the strong sense of the word (that is to say, turned against itself). The absence of agreement on other points made it possible slip in, after the proposition that women are a class, a series of intermediate statements which replaced the conclusion that men are the main enemy, with one which said that women are the main enemy of women . . .

Not only must criticism of heterosexuality be dissociated from the condemnation of individuals, of heterosexual women, this dissociation is central to radical feminism . . . □

Born in Flames



"Black women get ready, white women be ready, Red women stay ready", says Black radio Phoenix deejay Honey in the unmissable new feminist film *Born in Flames*. The director and editor Lizzie Borden was in London recently for the film's British launch. Sharon Roughan and Judy Greenway talked to her. Sharon edited this interview for *Trouble and Strife*.

Lizzie Borden is American and an ex-painter. She has worked as an art critic and as an editor of the New York feminist journal *Heresies*. During the five years that it took to make *Born in Flames* she worked as a film editor. Her first film was a documentary about women's consciousness raising groups — *Regrouping* (1976). Her films are mainly self-financed.

Born in Flames is set in the future, ten years on from a social democratic 'revolution' in America. Few of its promises for women have been fulfilled. The action centres around four groups of women who are drawn together — across class and race boundaries — and who by the end of the film unite as armed fighters against the government as a result of the oppressions that they are no longer willing to tolerate. The documentary style in which the film is shot makes its provocative questions as relevant to the present as the future.

The film is fast moving and humorous to watch, skillfully edited: the opening cuts quickly to Isabel of radio Regazza (played by Adele Bertel of the Bloods) on the anarchist white women's airwaves. The music of soul, reggae, punk and rock is as diverse as the feminist politics of the groups of women represented. Besides the Black and white women's radio stations, which by the end of the film become the voice of the new movement, two other groups are followed — the women's army and the

white socialist-feminist intellectuals. The women's army is racially mixed, made up of lesbian and heterosexual women and organises around rallies, demonstrations and vigilante groups against rape and sexual assaults. It is the murder of one of its members by the socialist democratic government which is a focal point in the film and acts as a catalyst that brings all the women together.

The women's armed actions are directed chiefly against the media, in attempts to show 'the truth' about a supposedly egalitarian society. A socialist future where rape, sexual harassment and prostitution still exist; where homosexuality is punished and women's issues are seen as secondary; where wages for housework is seen as a means of keeping women in traditional roles and men are given preferential treatment in times of unemployment. Does anything sound familiar?

Cut between the shots of the women organising are scenes of the male politicians and the FBI monitoring the women. The men are sent up. They can't fathom the structure of the women's army, their raid on the women's centre leaflets leaves them mystified. There are many moments of irony in the film. Later on a psychoanalyst 'diagnoses' the women's army: 'It is fear of expressing their own masochism that has resulted in secondary female sadism' (!).

The film ends with the state transmission tower, the world Trade building, being blown up.

Question: The ending of the film has been interpreted as suggesting that in certain situations women should use violence. What was your intention?

Lizzie Borden: In *Village Voice* a woman journalist wrote a long tortured review about how she as a white middle class journalist was presented as being on the wrong side of the fence and that the film prescribed violence. She didn't get that on that level the film was an allegory. She saw that *A Question of Silence* was an allegory but because of the documentary style of my film she misinterpreted it. It is not a shot about destroying anything. It continues the line of break-ins: first there's a real break-in to get their message on TV. They could get messages on every channel for about a minute before they were cut off. It is a metaphor for undercutting the old system. I wanted some way of exploding that huge phallic thing, the World Trade Tower, to show that we can start afresh by women working together.

Q: Why did you choose to set the film in the future rather than now?

LB: I was trying to make it more real by showing that nothing will change in the future unless there is a more radical transformation of the social structure, no matter what that society is called. By doing that it

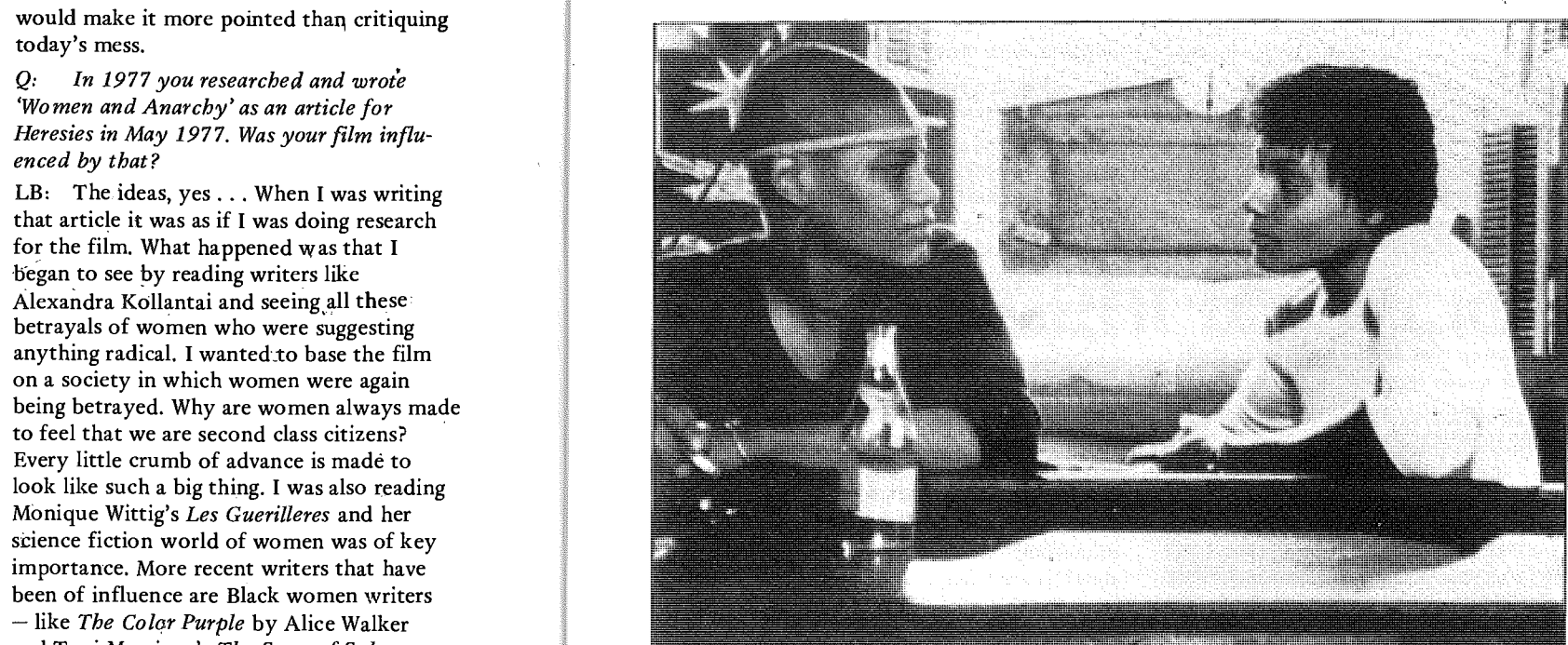
would make it more pointed than critiquing today's mess.

Q: In 1977 you researched and wrote 'Women and Anarchy' as an article for Heresies in May 1977. Was your film influenced by that?

LB: The ideas, yes . . . When I was writing that article it was as if I was doing research for the film. What happened was that I began to see by reading writers like Alexandra Kollantai and seeing all these betrayals of women who were suggesting anything radical. I wanted to base the film on a society in which women were again being betrayed. Why are women always made to feel that we are second class citizens? Every little crumb of advance is made to look like such a big thing. I was also reading Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres* and her science fiction world of women was of key importance. More recent writers that have been of influence are Black women writers — like *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon*. It was very important for me to hear the voices of these Black women writers that hadn't been heard before.

Q: You started working on your film without a script, can you explain how the structure of your film evolved and how you found your actors?

LB: It wasn't until I met some of the key people in the film that it coalesced. And Honey (the speaker on the Black women's radio, Phoenix) was a key person. I found her by accident. I was recruiting people in the street who looked like they could be in a women's army. Do you want to be in a movie? The woman who says in the film, "I don't want to be in the women's army, the women's army is not mature enough to hang out with me." I found her in the street and she's Honey's roommate. The minute I met Honey and told her about the film she really wanted to be involved. She was a self-trained musician from a Brooklyn ghetto, with no formal education, who'd never been in front of the camera before. Knowing her brought to me a certain awareness of what women, who were very strong women, wanted and were after. I got to know her friends and family.



Honey and Adelaide Norris (Jeanne Satterfield)

Flo Kennedy was also a key person. I wanted an older Black woman who had gone through various struggles before. She's not taken too seriously by the media but I think she's brilliant and those stories that she tells are her own. She's used to the media and uses it in a very forceful way. Adelaide Norris (the woman killed by the FBI) was meant only to pose for a photo in the newspaper but it turned out that she had to become a real person. She became politicised working with Flo. The people I started working with were the three white newspaper editors (one of them is Pat Murphy who made *Maeve*). They were supposed to have much larger roles but as I became involved with women from other backgrounds it seemed less important. They could represent the intellectuals but their positions didn't have to be gone into that much.

Q: Do you think that it is realistic having women align on issues of sex rather than race?

LB: In America Black and white women working together does exist on some levels, though not on others. The film represents those levels it does and doesn't work on. The women's army is a mixed Black and white group. One of the reasons I was so interested in making the film was that I

knew I was shocked that the small groups of political activity or even social activity in the US was so divided into races. Even women's bars — you don't go into certain bars if you're Black, others if you're white and others if you're Puerto Rican. You're made to feel very uncomfortable if you're the wrong race. For me that was horrifying, for women I always thought were somewhat advanced to be reproducing the same kinds of problems.

I met with a lot of suspicion when I first started making the film. It wasn't until I was working heavily with Jeannie and Honey — that changed my approach. And since it was a collaboration and Honey started bringing in her mother and sisters I felt more comfortable within the communities. I would be shooting in communities where I was the only white person for miles. I did feel awkward at first and I did confront even violence at the beginning. The film in a way is a microcosm of the world of working together that I would have wanted in the outside. The film was the reason to work together and a project to see if it could be done. What was exciting about the collaboration were things that can't necessarily be seen in the film. Little things — Honey,



Honey on Phoenix Radio

Adele and some other Black women were always with me, staying at my house during shooting.

In reality it's very difficult, and I've been alienated by the white middle class movement who were all for the equal rights amendment and that just seemed inappropriate to women in the ghetto, who were struggling for other things.

Q: Did you intend to have the women's radicalization focusing around Adelaide's death, because that can be politically problematic. It works very well in the structure of the film, but afterwards one starts to think about martyr figures...

LB: I know what you mean. But that was a conscious decision. My intention was to have something serve as a catalyst that would bring all the women's groups together. I was trying to show a movement of women who weren't like the ten or twenty of the Baader Meinhof group (the German urban guerrillas active in the 60s and 70s), who were like spoilt kids unconnected to the people, but women who had specific targets as part of a campaign. Flo Kennedy's speech (about Adelaide's death) is not a revenge broadcast but is more generally about what's happening and points out how wages for housework is being used by the socialist government to coopt women. I didn't want to over-refer to her death, and I wanted it to be as though she died and the women got on with their actions.

Q: Did you encounter any problems working with men on your film?

LB: The problem with finding women camera operators is that they've been underpaid so long it's hard for them to say that they'll work for little money. Whereas the two men I worked with were able to give me a lot of their time for very little money. It would be wonderful to work with an all-women's crew but I definitely need more money so as not to keep women working for sub-standard wages. Also it wasn't as if men were defining the image or the female being approached by a male eye. The eye was like a universal eye, anyone could have shot it. I wanted a very non-voyeuristic camera. A camera that would be very literal in a way; the only voyeurism in the film is

a conscious thing with the FBI being obsessed with these women's sex lives.

Q: Why did you choose to have a classical narrative film structure?

LB: I wanted a style that looked like anyone could have shot it. I wanted to avoid an escapist film; I wanted something that would bring the audience back to all those processes of film-making — editing, cutting etc. The premise of the film would not have held up if it was presented logically. I used rapid editing as I wanted the viewer to be aware that it was a film, a construct. I wanted to move away from a central character who the audience identifies with and present a multitude of characters offering different political perspectives. By avoiding psychological identification the perspectives are presented for the audience to consider. The two different radio stations show how we can keep our own desires but work for the same ends...

Q: What is your next project for a film?

LB: Prostitution. One idea leads to another. That anarchy article led to this film. This film lead me into questions about the whole notion of employment and alienation... It will be a fiction film but I will be working with a group of women who choose prostitution. This film will not be romanticised, or present women as victims, or be voyeuristic. If I had the funding I would love to make a film about the life of Emma Goldman. The setting would not be historical, but in the present, maybe the Chinese sweatshops substituting for the garment sweatshops of the early twentieth century.

Q: What do you see as the central statement of Born in Flames?

LB: The film expresses the hope that women will be able to work together, that the bitter conflicts that have existed within the women's community — between lesbians and heterosexuals, between women of different races — will one day disappear. That women can work together across class and race lines. □

Born in Flames is distributed by Cinema of Women, 01-251 4978, and opens at Islington Screen on the Green in London in February.

Women's liberation/left split in NAC Whose right to decide?

The National Abortion Campaign (NAC) — at one time the largest campaign in Britain on a woman's issue — has split its resources and become two groups. Alice Henry describes the divorce.

At the eighth annual conference of the National Abortion Campaign in London, 1st and 2nd October 1983, no consensus could be reached on the direction of the campaign. Of 154 women and two men voting, 83 wanted the campaign to address a broad range of women's reproductive rights and 70 wanted NAC to be a single issue abortion campaign.

Over half the active NAC members wanted the campaign to work on a variety of reproductive rights issues — everything covered by "our bodies, our lives, our right to decide". This demand has grown out of the women's liberation movement and clearly implies that not only must individual women have the right to decide, but that any campaign around these issues must be women-only. A sizable minority wanted the campaign to stick to campaigning on abortion rights. They claim that single issue campaigns are more effective and that women and men who are politically active in a number of groups may find it possible to support a campaign for legislation on abortion, but more difficult to support a campaign on the more general issue of reproductive rights.

The major visible issue was whether NAC should be 'broad-based and narrow issue' (appeal to all individuals and groups that think abortion should be legal), or be 'woman-based and broad issue' — appeal to feminists who think 'our right to decide' is the under-lying issue. That is, even 'free' abortion on demand' makes little sense un-

less women can choose whether and when to have sex and unless they are then given information so they can choose the safest contraceptive available.

So what's the problem?

One might expect the women in NAC to compromise or work together. Why couldn't women who wanted to work on



Scene from the NAC conference.

abortion legislation get on with that, while women who wanted to hold day conferences on contraceptive issues do that? Why should feminists who want to work on a WLM reproductive rights campaign feel they can no longer work with feminists who want to get trade union support for an abortion rights campaign?

The friction within the group might have been bearable, and even productive, if it were not for the widely known but unmentionable fact that members of the British section of the Fourth International were very active in NAC, and it was the women who were associated with Fourth International politics who rigidly adhered to the principle of single issue organising. The Fourth International is an international socialist organisation of Trotskyist persuasion that follows 'democratic centralism' as a way of organising. In this type of organisation, every member has a say in deciding policy through a hierarchical structure based on local cells, but once policy is accepted, every member is obliged to work for and defend the policy.

The International Marxist Group (IMG), the British section of the Fourth International, took an active part in the formation of NAC, and helped enormously in working to get union backing for mass demonstrations that had helped persuade parliament that abortion should remain legal. NAC was one of the most successful organising actions of the IMG and presumably IMG (now renamed Socialist League) felt they deserved to have a voice in any NAC decision on direction.

Socialist League is not always sure it wants officially to exist, but they do publish a newspaper, *Socialist Action*. There are reasons for them to be a 'non-party'; there have been nasty struggles in the Labour Party over 'entryists', that is, men and women who have joined the Labour Party who are not publically representatives of other political parties, but who have been accused of being members of various left parties, or at the very least, of bringing the political lines of other left parties into the Labour Party. Leftists generally think it is bad news for more conservative Labour Party members to throw out those who have held, or now hold membership in other left

parties, as they see it as only a move in the power struggle between right and left within the Labour Party.

Whether or not to report that some of the most avid supporters of NAC being a single issue campaign were members of the IMG or are now associates of the Socialist League is a continuing issue. Some women on the *Spare Rib* collective, for example, thought printing this information would discredit the single issue faction and readers would dismiss their views on the grounds of political affiliation rather than on the virtues of running a single issue campaign. Because they were radicals and disliked 'witch-hunts', the reproductive rights group never responded publically when asked about the politics behind the disagreements in NAC, even though they thought NAC should be a women-only campaign and that women should not bring the political line of a mixed-sex political party on how to run a women's campaign into NAC. However, if women do not know the political affiliations of both sides, there is no way they can understand why some women adamantly supported a single issue campaign and other women felt the politics of the single issue group were flawed.

Hidden agenda

A left group supporting a single issue abortion campaign to the ends of the earth is most peculiar. Most left feminists support broad reproductive rights campaigns that attack sterilisation abuse and contraceptive pushing by doctors along with demanding abortion rights. The left in the US has attacked feminists for the racism inherent in too single-mindedly pushing for 'free abortion on demand'. As the reproductive rights group point out as well, it is actually more difficult for white, middle class, married women to get abortions than anyone else, since doctors think they're the 'right sort' to have babies... while Black, poor, single or young women are discouraged from having babies and much more likely to be pressured into sterilisation, contraception or abortion. Why would a nice socialist group like IMG want to support a policy that has been attacked as racist? They claim it is not racist, and insist abortion is an issue for Blacks as much as for whites.

On the other hand, the IMG-SL does support the International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilisation Campaign which is a broad reproductive rights campaign. Somehow, they have convinced themselves that it is appropriate to support a reproductive rights campaign everywhere but in Britain. Of course, it is possible that some women within the Socialist League disagreed with and were unhappy about the insistence on limiting the campaign, but couldn't say that at the conference itself.

Is the insistence on single issue campaigns connected with the desire of the Fourth International to be a 'vanguard'? They figure out the correct line on everything and then find groups that might implement each individual line. The head of an octopus can't cope with one of its arms turning into a head; and IMG/SL thinks of itself as a head. Of course, the intransigence about broadening NAC may have had more to do with the feminism of the reproductive rights group, especially its insistence on being a women-only campaign. Trotskyists tend not to see women as a political force in their own right; women only become politically important as workers in trade unions.

What about men?

At the national conference in October, the first important question after debate opened was "What about men?" A single

issue supporter asked whether men would be encouraged to join a women's reproductive rights campaign. Speakers for the reproductive rights campaign replied that the campaign would be planned, organised, and run by women — but of course men would be asked for support. The single issue women asked how a women's reproductive rights campaign could expect to get Labour Party and trade union support. The supporters of a broader campaign thought it would be a shame if affiliations were lost in the short run, but wondered why single issue supporters thought this would be a long term problem. Did they suspect men would be more reluctant to support women's right to decide on their sexuality and on childbearing than they were to support availability of abortion?

One woman said it seemed NAC was getting bogged down in seeking trade union support, and she wondered if that was at least partly a search for male approval. Other women replied that there were women in trade unions; to not seek union support was tantamount to turning our backs on trade union women. However, the reproductive rights supporters reiterated that they valued trade union support, but they thought trade unions should support reproductive rights, not just abortion.

Despite all the talk about bringing issues to men and women in trade unions, no one brought up the issue of men in political

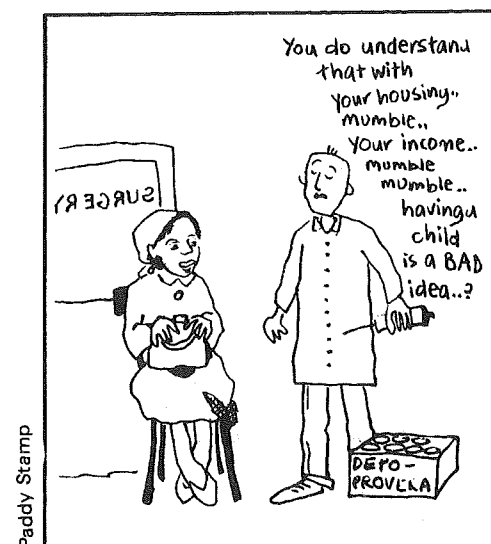
Women's Reproductive Rights Campaign

At a meeting before the Manchester divorce proceedings, around thirty women from several cities in England and Wales met to discuss their politics and to set up a national conference.

The reproductive rights campaign intends to stress to local organising which will address the issues that women in specific communities find most pressing. The London group is planning a conference on new information on the cancer hazards of the pill. The Leeds group have already held a day conference that included information on, and discussion of, sexually transmitted diseases, depo-provera (the injectible contraceptive), new reproductive technology such as in vitro fertilisation, morning-after contraception, and racism and feminist health organising.

International issues will be a strong part of the reproductive rights campaign — it already has links with the International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilisation Campaign (ICASC) co-ordination group based in London.

For a list of local groups, contact them at 374 Grays Inn Rd., London WC1.





parties bringing their political priorities into NAC. In informal discussions after the national conference, people were less discreet. Socialist men were overheard talking about "fems (ie feminists) making a fuss" in NAC. Peculiar reports appeared in *Socialist Action* that implied NAC would continue as it was, although some dissident feminist extremists had split away. The conference report in the Scottish NAC newsletter did not mention that NAC was dissolving into two groups.

New NAC

The 'new NAC' will hold a national conference on 'Abortion Rights and Facilities - What Future?' in London, February 1984. They will take up a range of questions from what abortion facilities now exist, and what treatment women get within them to what women want for the future. They will also examine existing legislation and what can be done to implement the 1967 Act. They particularly want to fight against the current activities of anti-abortion organisations.

Although some women interested in joining and running 'new NAC' are tied to SL politics, some are feminists who believe that the time has come to bring feminist politics into trade unions, and that it is "out of date to be a women-only campaign".

'New NAC' can be reached at 47 Waldram Park Road, London SE23 2PW.

The Divorce Settlement

There were around fifty people at the divorce hearing in Manchester on 19th November - one man, the rest women. The goods to be divided had been extensively listed. Most resources (mailing lists and files) were easily divisible or could be duplicated. Others were undisputed (the reproductive rights group claimed the banner saying "Our bodies, our lives, our right to decide" and the abortion rights group took the banner saying "NAC").

One particularly sticky point was responsibility for debts. Both sides were agreed they should split the responsibilities half and half. The only argument was how much redundancy money NAC should pay the national office workers. One worker had worked for three years, ten months and was legally due three weeks' pay for redundancy. The other worker had worked less than a year and was not legally entitled to any redundancy. The reproductive rights group thought both workers should be paid over the legal mini-

mum - an extra two weeks to each of the two workers. They felt especially strongly that the newer worker be given two weeks redundancy since she was going to be facing joblessness as much as the long term worker. The abortion rights group felt that only the legal minimum should be paid.

One abortion rights advocate said a small minority in Scottish NAC felt the workers deserved no redundancy as they had stood by their politics, that is had supported a reproductive rights campaign, which were forcing a split in the NAC campaign. One of the office workers replied that she thought supporters of workers' rights usually thought workers should not be fired for their political stands. Many thought it peculiar that the representative on the Trades Union Liaison Committee (TULC) was one of the most vocal supporters of paying only the legal minimum, plus a "contribution" to the office worker who had worked less than a year. At the end of the day, the reproductive rights group was committed to paying at least half of what the meeting had overwhelmingly approved (the legal minimum plus two weeks) but the Scottish NAC and TULC were only committed to the legal minimum, plus whatever the TULC decided to contribute to the newer worker.

What's in a name?

The most public resources of NAC were the office and the name. The reproductive rights group will continue to use the office, and the abortion rights group will continue to use the name of NAC. The reproductive rights group felt the name was a mixed blessing. In the women's movement, NAC was identified as not being a women's liberation campaign - the influence of the IMG in its early days was well known. The abortion rights group wanted the name. They had hoped the public would believe that NAC still existed, even if everything but the name had changed. The reproductive rights group would have preferred that 'NAC' be withdrawn from use by either group, but agreed as long as the abortion rights group made an effort to let the public and the affiliates of the old campaign know that they were not the same as 'old NAC'. □

Have you heard the one about sisterhood?

The US feminist magazine Quest aimed to bring class and race issues into the women's movement. Dena Attar here looks at their anthology, Building Feminist Theory, to see how far they managed this.

I sometimes wonder about the way radical ideas get into mass-circulation print. Don't the publishers, distributors, printers and booksellers involved realise they're handling dynamite? With a few exceptions they're antifeminist capitalists to a man - meaning man - so how come they decide to send out into the world these urgent calls to revolution? I've noticed a couple of ways in which they aim to collect their profits without rocking the boat too wildly. One is to package a book so that no-one takes it seriously, like the first edition of Valerie Solanas' *Scum Manifesto*. Another is to make it look boringly serious, give it an off-putting title and cover, price it high so it will never be a best-seller and just aim to make enough money out of it from the assured academic-feminist market which now exists for such books.

So now let me introduce to you *Building feminist theory/essays from Quest/a feminist quarterly*. As you'll have guessed from the ploddingly dull title, Longmans Inc went for Option Two. The title reminds me of those Trotskyist organisations which are forever 'building' for the revolution. It doesn't reflect to me the way in which we develop our ideas as feminists, and from what the writers included in the anthology have to say about feminist process, it doesn't do justice to their ways of working either. Here once more is a collection of ideas which deserves to be better known. The women who wrote for *Quest* have given me inspiration and courage and strengthened my feminism through their work. But I can't help being aware of the barriers... the book isn't widely available, it's expensive at £6.50,

some of it is not very readable, the cover is depressing... coincidence? Or did Longmans Inc know what they were about when they decided not to try very hard with this one?

Building feminist theory is a collection of articles taken from the journal *Quest* published in the USA in the mid-seventies. *Quest* first came out in 1974 and its stated aims were to promote the search for strategies and ideologies which would serve the women's liberation movement best in its struggle for change. Karen Kollias wrote in the introduction to the first issue:

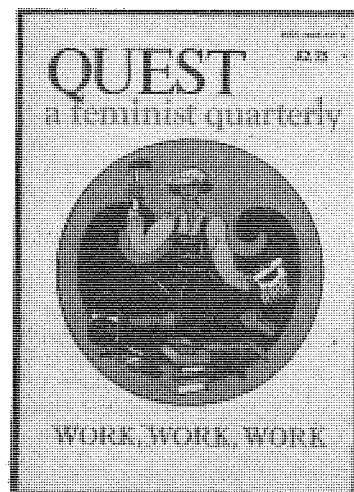
We are about change. We assume that the women's movement, and those involved in it, consider complete and fundamental change a primary goal... We are about ideology. The time has come to expand feminist ideology. Differences in geographical location, race, class, sex preference, religion, age and other factors must be included for a broader, more realistic ideology that moves towards a workable base for unity.

That's it in a nutshell: the big question for the *Quest* collective appears to have been 'How can the women's liberation movement unite women?' To find some answers they took the lids off a whole cupboardful of cans of worms - occasionally putting them on again pretty quick. Karen Killias' statement about us needing "a broader, more realistic ideology" also sums up my dilemma with the book. While it's undeniably true that we can't ignore all the differences she lists, and each one of us must start from our own oppression however we experience it, I don't know how you can get any broader than saying, as feminism does, that *all* women are oppressed. And why is it "more realistic" to look at the differences between

We are about change. We assume that the women's movement, and those involved in it, consider complete and fundamental change a primary goal...

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We all know those are issues on women's minds, but through resentment or guilt don't know how to begin talking.



women than to look at the oppression of all women by men?

The essays are grouped in four sections: Power and practice; Politics of everyday life; Feminist perspectives on class; Organisations and strategies. Many of the articles could have used some background notes because they are not self-contained. As I read I felt constantly that each writer was rising to a particular challenge, answering her critics or joining in an existing debate.

I found the most readable, straightforward essays were those dealing with the internal politics of the movement. Nancy Hartsock starts off by confronting the question 'What's wrong with power and leadership?' American feminists in the early seventies had tried to reconcile the idea of a leaderless, structureless movement with the fact that certain women were emerging as 'stars'. Nancy Hartsock distinguishes very lucidly between the power of an oppressive kind — controlling, dominating — and power as energy and accomplishment. She argues that in rejecting power and leadership as male, women were revealing a class bias, since working-class women had more of a tradition of strength and independence. Elsewhere in the book Karen Kollias, writing on class, and Jackie St. Joan in 'Female Leaders' take up the question of how we can have leadership without elites. I found all their ideas highly relevant to my experience of feminist groups and meetings. How often have you heard a woman criticised for being articulate, as if articulacy were a middle-class prerogative — it certainly isn't — and as if being able to put thoughts into words were itself a means of oppression instead of a tool which we could all use and share?

There's a lot on class in the anthology — it's by no means confined to one section — and I honestly have very mixed feelings about some of the essays. My first reaction was relief that some feminists somewhere were coming up with such positive, constructive ideas for confronting class divisions amongst women within the movement and in general, rather than just wringing their hands. For instance Mary McKenney's 'Class attitudes and professionalism' is a superb analysis of the middle-class ideology of professionalism, which disguises the real

differences between classes and keeps the middle class complacent. She details those 'professional' attitudes which serve to defend the status quo: 'we are more dedicated', 'we are less bourgeois', 'we are more liberated', 'we are more liberal', and, final piece of evasion, 'we will define class'. Another challenge to middle class feminists is Beverly Fisher-Manick's 'Put your money where your movement is'.

If we had a few photocopies of these articles in circulation I am optimistic it would help to break down the strained silence about class and money which springs up when we all know those issues are on women's minds, but through resentment or guilt don't know how to begin talking.

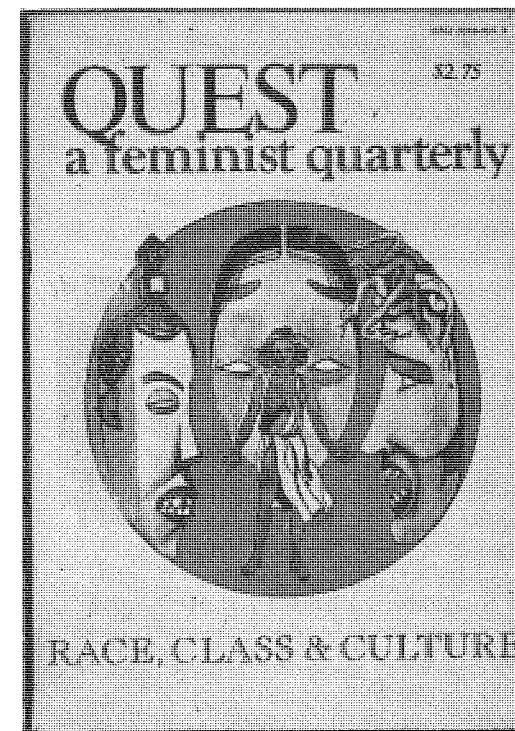
It struck me that the *Quest* writers were on surest ground when they talked about attitudes, or else when they were writing in purely abstract terms about fitting Marxist and feminist analyses together. It was when they began discussing the failings of feminist ideology and practice that I spotted the contradictions jumping off the page and started to feel really uneasy. For instance Karen Kollias quotes with approval the San Diego Women's Studies Program:

It (sisterhood) came from women in the movement who were mainly white, middle class women. They believed that all women were our sisters... this made them gloss over differences that were real differences in women's social realities (class, race, sexual preference).

Then to my intense annoyance Karen Kollias goes on to lump consciousness raising and feminist therapy groups together, seeing them as two tools which "might have provided roots for group identity in the movement, but... were successful with only a small number of women".

Haven't you heard this one about sisterhood before? I seem to hear it all the time. An article by Jenny Bourne in *Race & Class* (Summer 1983) 'Towards an anti-racist feminism', takes a similar line. Jenny Bourne says of the Western women's liberation movement (which significantly she calls just the women's movement)

In an eagerness to promote the idea of sisterhood, it has ignored the complexities of experience. While claiming to liberate women from biological determinism, it has denied



women an existence outside that determined by their sex. And behind the idea that every woman is equally oppressed biologically is the idea that gender per se, rather than a particular system or set of relations, is the primary enemy of women.

Who said anything about gender, or 'biological oppression'? I always thought we were talking about men, and the institutions of male supremacy — hardly abstract concepts. This is a travesty of radical feminism, and Jenny Bourne's version of consciousness raising is equally a travesty. She says it's an inappropriate means of confronting racism because "The world, says CR, is in your head, not out there".

We have to keep on repeating that CR is not about the world in our heads, nor are we stupid enough to believe that we can end any form of oppression through CR alone. Nor were the early radical feminists an exceptionally naive bunch of women who happened not to have noticed race and class differences. On the contrary, their feminist analysis emerged from their involvement in the politics of black liberation and class struggle — it didn't pop up from nowhere, ideas never do — as they came to see that the oppression of women, by men, underpinned and transcended all other forms of oppression. They are depicted as invariably white

and middle class but was that really so, or was it that the media representation of them made any non-white or working class women invisible? I don't know the answer but I think we should remember to ask the question.

On several occasions the *Quest* writers, in pushing class to the forefront and suggesting how feminism can appear less alienating to working class women, are back-peddalling on feminist analysis. They have a tendency to simply forget about men. Beverly Fisher-Manick criticises the narrow focus of feminist analysis of the family and says

The family is often the 'soul' of minority and lower-class culture. It provides a shelter from the abuses of a classist, racist, sexist society.

This rather conveniently overlooks two vital points. First, patriarchal capitalism intends us to see the family as a shelter. Second, far from sheltering us from 'sexism', the family is where women and children experience the most violence and sexual abuse, and that is a cross-class, cross-cultural phenomenon.

Fisher-Manick suggests too that feminism had "overlooked how (the housewife and mother) roles often are fulfilling and important to many women" and alienates women because of this. (Meanwhile in another part of the book Lucia Valeska states that "Since failure is built into child-raising in our society, there is no such thing as a good mother and no such thing as a good self-concept emerging from this work"). On a similar tack Charlotte Bunch warns that "some women's reforms even appear to worsen their (working class women's) situations, for example, when middle class women are given jobs ahead of the working class men whose income supports the working class woman". Now I don't believe these writers are really suggesting that feminists should start saying how fulfilling it is to be a housewife and mother, or that a working class man has more right to a job than a middle class woman. These are just examples of the kind of mess I think their feminism gets into when they start seeing women's oppression as secondary. They at least ought to know that the criticisms they mention don't only come from working class women. Everyone who attacks feminism says pretty much the same about how we undervalue the joys of motherhood,

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None of them wants to tackle the question of how class oppression, let alone class itself, is different for women than for men.

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The oppressed group has a much more accurate picture of the dominant group than the powerful have of the oppressed.

and so forth. The argument is ultimately about our acceptance or non-acceptance of the roles men prescribe for us whatever our class.

Even while they're saying we shouldn't stereotype working class women, the writers I've singled out do a lot of stereotyping themselves. While they acknowledge that race, class and sex must all contribute to, and modify how an individual woman experiences her oppression, none of them wants to tackle the question of how class oppression, let alone class itself, is different for women than for men. They swap around between 'class' meaning class attributes (lifestyle) and 'class' as Marxism defines it (economic class) without distinguishing. At times they go in for criticisms of media misrepresentations of feminism as if they are the real thing, rebuking feminists for the sayings and activities of non-feminists or non-existent feminists. And when they concentrate on the divisions between women without seeing how these are created and why and ignore our common oppression — Lucia Valeska makes a flip reference to Ethel Kennedy as having a better self-concept than "your basic mother of eleven"; my immediate thought was what choice did she have over her eleven pregnancies? — they almost give the impression that feminists are responsible for the divisions and that we can overcome them by raising our consciousness about it and maybe sharing out a little money. Of course that is not what they intend to say.

The picture is confused because I don't think that the essays on class added up to a coherent picture. There's an obvious parallel with current debates on racism. Jenny Bourne in *Race & Class* criticises feminists for seeing racism purely as a matter of personal behaviour and ignoring institutional racism. These articles take an approach which makes feminists vulnerable to that charge. But 'the personal is political' never meant that feminism was only prepared to deal with the personal. For me, among other things, it means not accepting that there's total separation between the racism of the state and the racist behaviour of individuals. Consciousness raising is about understanding that, not about shifting the burden of responsibility one way or the other.

Although there's an acute awareness of racism throughout the book there's surprisingly little on race as such — just two essays. One of them, 'Confrontation: Black/White', by Ginny Apuzzo and Betty Powell, describes a three-day conference organised jointly by the National Black Feminist Organisation and Sagaris, another feminist group, in 1975. It was held "to explore the linkage between racism and sexism . . . to provide training to eliminate the kinds of unconscious racist or sexist blocks within ourselves that prevent the building of a multiracial women's movement that really moves".

Maybe if some brave women organised a similar event here it could do a lot for the morale of the movement, although a weakness of the conference seems to have been that it was about attitudes and perceptions, rather than about the other material realities of oppression or even the politics of race and sex. (I always think it's a giveaway when someone uses the word 'sexism', which tends to mean 'discrimination', rather than 'patriarchy' or 'male supremacy' meaning a system of oppression). I also found it frustrating that the authors didn't describe the workings of the conference in more detail, though they do pick out some clear and valuable insights, like the parallels between racism and women's oppression, which the participants gained from it, for example that "the oppressed group has a much more accurate picture of the dominant group than the powerful have of the oppressed". True for class as well.

Building feminist theory doesn't manage to provide a coherent feminist politics of race and class, perhaps because while the authors are trying to get beyond the straightforward socialist view which doesn't take sufficient account of women's oppression, they overlooked what radical feminism has to offer. Would a better title for the anthology be 'Daughter of Socialist Feminism meets Ghost of Radical Feminism'? □

Quest, *Building Feminist Theory*, (Longman, 1981), £6.50.

Thanks especially to Penny Bainbridge for her help with this review.

Not weaving but frowning

A review of 'Breaching the Peace', Onlywomen Press, 1983, £1.25.

The questions this pamphlet raises are primarily concerned with whether the women only actions at Greenham Common are *feminist* actions, and whether the peace issue is a women's (and therefore feminist) issue. Nearly all the contributors refer to the fact that they were made to feel a sense of guilt at *not* going to the December action, and most strongly feel that 'Greenham' (which seems to have become general slang for the women's peace movement) has taken on a 'holy status' amongst many feminists, which has made critical analysis or unease almost impossible to express.

Not surprisingly, as the papers are written by radical feminists, the major unease which the writers felt centred around the argument that 'liberation' from nuclear weapons is not in any way connected to *women's* liberation. That we, as women, are fighting for 'peace', indeed for our very existence, at all times. Politically a radical feminist analysis of power relations within society must reject the idea that if enough people stand up to be counted 'they' will have to listen. The only way to topple male power is to build a power base from which to unpick the patriarchal structure from the bottom. In 'starting from the top' by trying to topple "the ultimate expression of patriarchal madness" we are doing *only* that, removing the top layer without making any impression on the structure that *caused* the madness.

I particularly like Frankie Green's point: So, it's OK to link arms and hold hands around a military base in the cause of peace, but do it on the streets for the love of it and it's another matter, as any dyke who's been beaten up can tell you.

Many of the papers draw attention to the early 'media' image of Greenham, the portrayal of the women as 'ordinary' — that is white, middle class, heterosexual mothers concerned only for the future of their children. They suggest that the appeal of the women's peace movement depended upon

this stereotype. Certainly as the movement has become more effective, the newspapers have increasingly changed their approach to abusing the women as maniac lesbians, trying to make their protest illegitimate.

The various arguments and misgivings put forward in the book are a very welcome addition to the Greenham literature. It is the first time, apart from a few isolated instances, that any constructive criticism of the women's peace movement has come from *feminists*. Whatever the difficulties raised by the women's peace movement, though, we all of us have to face the fact that it is providing large numbers of women with *something*. Greenham is exciting and exhilarating for a great many women, and let no-one forget that the women who live there in small camps, all year round, are now under constant threat and attack from local residents, as well as from the police and the military. *All* women are at constant war with this patriarchal society, women at Greenham no less than the rest.

I am particularly troubled, however, by a point raised in the postscript to Lynn Alderson's paper, that there are now organisations such as "Women for Peace through Defence", using the same logic of "defending their families and homes" as the women's peace movement, but backed by the Tories and in favour of nuclear weapons. If the same arguments can be used to put the opposite case then the validity of these politics must surely be open to grave doubt?

Opening up this debate raises important questions: On the one hand the women's peace movement seems to have made many radical feminists examine the current state of the WLM in a different light, even if we don't particularly like what we see! And on the other, with cruise missiles having now arrived at Greenham, forcing a reassessment of priorities, it would be more than a pity if this set back made women despair of fighting for *women's* liberation.

Pam Muttram

Breaching the Peace is a collection of papers, most of which were written for a half-day radical feminist workshop held in London on 10th April 1983, called "The Women's Liberation Movement versus the Women's Peace Movement or How Dare You Presume I went to Greenham?" The last part of the conference title refers to the blockade "embracing the base" on 11/12th December 1982, in which 30,000 women participated.



Cath Jackson

Writing Our Own History 2

Working for the Women's Liberation Movement: starting WIRES

In 1975, an information service and newsletter was set up by the National Women's Liberation Conference. This service, later called WIRES — Women's Information, Referral and Enquiry Service — is the only feminist institution in this country ever set up in such a democratic way. Sophie Laws interviewed three of the Leeds group that first ran WIRES, Wendy Collins, Al Garthwaite and Maria Spellacy, about working for the Women's Liberation Movement — and about how they, and it, have changed.

Sophie: Was it out of discussions in your Chapeltown women's group that the idea of doing a national newsletter first came about, or had it been talked about before?

Al: It had been talked about a lot — it's here in a report from a conference on the structure and organisation of the women's movement, held at Warwick University, 20th April 1974, and in the minutes of a discussion at a libertarian women's conference, June '74.

Wendy: There'd been the start of a discussion at the Edinburgh national conference in 1974, hadn't there?

A: And then the Women and Socialism conference, March 22nd 1975 . . . They often don't say anything concrete.

I remember when we first discussed it, we brought an idea to a meeting of the Chapeltown women's liberation group on organisation.

W: It wasn't that we wanted to take it on, though, to begin with — we wanted it to happen.

Maria: The way I remember it is that as a women's group, we'd done all sorts of things, but we'd been going for about two or three years, and we were approaching the point where it wasn't really viable. We were quite preoccupied with the movement, and where it was going. The newsletter was a whole new way to go.

W: I was really opposed to it — I thought that if we took that on, the Chapeltown women's group, as a women's group, would collapse. And it did . . . But, as it happened, most of us got involved in *WIRES*, so it went on in a different form.

M: We were very aware of how much was happening in Leeds; there was the Feminist Press, our health group was one of the first

health groups in the country . . .

W: Child care was very strong, all kinds of stuff. But the only events you ever heard about were events that went on in London. Everyone subscribed to the London newsletter because there wasn't anything else, and nobody had ever decided, like, that these particular women should run it, and it seemed very undemocratic.

National discussions

S: *So did you take a proposal to the next national conference?*

W: Yes, the Manchester one (1975). Everybody had to go to a workshop on organisation. There was a paper proposing a national information centre. And there was a paper opposing it, saying it would destroy the autonomous women's group, and then it went to the plenary.

S: *Did anyone argue against it in the plenary?*

W: Oh yes!

A: I remember one woman said it would give a small group of women an enormous amount of power, and we couldn't understand it because we were very keen *not* to have power, and we'd never really had experience of movement structures where power had been accumulated and then misused.

W: What had happened before was the whole 'tyranny of structurelessness' thing that people actually had power that wasn't recognised. So what we were saying was, if somebody is running the newsletter, you've got to put limits on them so they don't abuse the power. That was why we had the thing about it moving from one town to another, six monthly meetings, all ways of making it accountable, because nothing else ever had been accountable.

I can remember getting up at that conference, in the Manchester Free Trade Hall, because everyone was getting very het up about the details of it . . . I can remember getting up and saying "We're not voting on the details, we're voting on the *principle*, can't you understand we're only voting on the *principle*!" And the next week in the London newsletter, there was this thing about this woman trying to confuse us all by saying that we're only voting on the principle . . .

M: We couldn't see how we would try to do something which was harmful to any women. We could see that we might make a mistake, and get it wrong, but we didn't actually see that we were going to be taking the power or prestige or something for ourselves . . . we were incredibly scrupulous, and we also had great faith in ourselves.

W: We had a little meeting very soon afterwards at the Community Centre — the first one, in May, about *WIRES*, except it wasn't called *WIRES* then, it was WLMNIS, the Women's Liberation Movement National Information Service. And very few people came to that — after all this fuss at the conference, hardly anyone actually came to the meeting.

A: And the ones that came were quite positive, apart from one woman from Blackburn — who said how dare we do something for the movement, we should be going outwards towards men, and women outside the movement.

'Women out there'

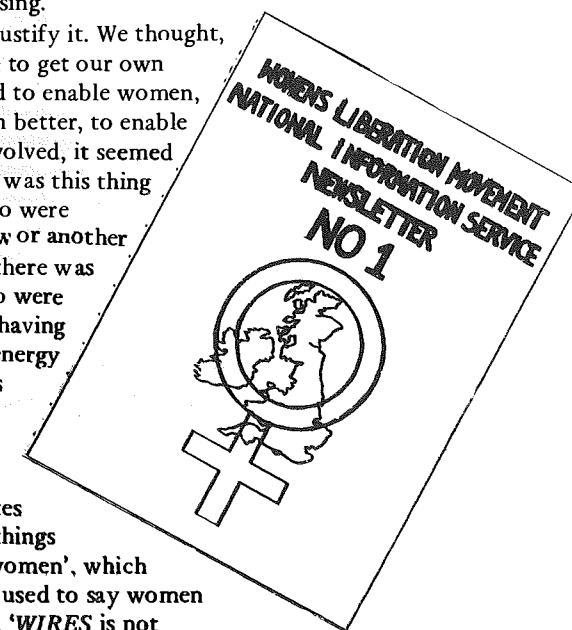
M: That was one of the things we got quite obsessed with during our first bit of *WIRES*, that if we were doing something for the movement, then that was wrong, that we had to be going out, like, to 'ordinary women'.

A: It was very patronising.

M: We felt we had to justify it. We thought, we need to strengthen, to get our own resources together, and to enable women, the groups, to function better, to enable more women to get involved, it seemed self-evident. But there was this thing that there was 'us', who were feminists, and somehow or another we were all right, and there was 'women out there' who were totally oppressed and having a dreadful time. Any energy that was spent inwards was somehow taking away from them.

A: Some of our minutes said very patronising things about 'working class women', which was at that time being used to say women outside the movement. '*WIRES* is not suitable for working class women' — it was

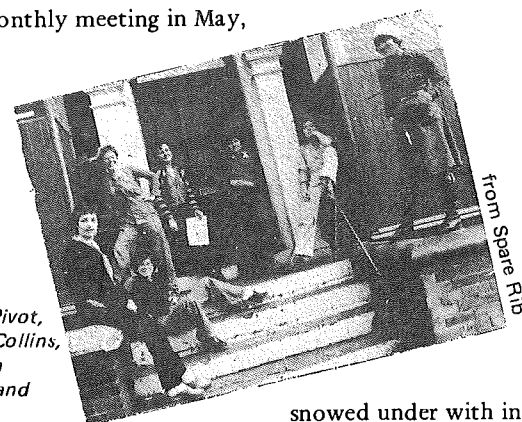
Jo Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, (1970), reprinted many times. Now available from Dark Star Press, c/o 5 Caledonian Rd, London N1.



that sort of thing . . . And then there was London; they weren't saying that, it was more, "who are these women because we haven't heard of them, they're trying to take over, and they're nasty, and want to have something called a constitution, and they don't know that we call it guidelines, and that's all right, but they call it a constitution . . ."

M: But we *were* totally power-seeking, weren't we? We worked out the power situation, didn't like it because it wasn't in our favour, so we tried to do something about it! And since feminism was about the powerless taking from the powerful, we just got on with it. But why they should see us as a threat, we were innocent of that, we were so *nice* . . . But really we were questioning their power, weren't we?

A: We had that six-monthly meeting in May,



December 1976: Agnes Pivot, Ellen Friedman, Wendy Collins, Maggie Smallwood, Maria Spellacy, Al Garthwaite and Pauline Huerre.

then another in September, and we kept revising the constitution. A couple of women who came to those meetings were from *News from Women's Liberation*, which was a sort of *WIRES* forerunner, but they'd just started it off their own bat — it had a lot of foreign news, as I remember. It came from London, Shepherd's Bush. They were all right, these women; they were really pleased, in fact — they said they'd continue to do the news from abroad, and they'd send anything British to us.

Servicing local groups

M: In the early days, we saw it as a servicing agency for the groups, an extension of the work of the groups. There was a group rate and an individual rate for subs, and we hoped that just about every group would subscribe to *WIRES* . . . That never

happened, did it? There were only a few groups, and it was mostly individuals, and that was quite a disappointment to us. That was our credibility, if you like — if every group subscribed, everyone would be involved.

A: We also thought that the group subs would subsidise the information service work, whereas the individual subs paid for the newsletter full stop, and that the whole of the movement would want a central address for women to write to to be referred to groups in their own area. That seems to have been the part that's expanded and expanded, so that there's loads of women from 'outside the movement' writing in now. And that's partly why they don't get the newsletter out so often, because they're just so

snowed under with info service. But perhaps we were a bit unrealistic about the groups, because things happen — like they'd get their newsletters, then they'd pass them on to one another at the meetings, or someone would sit on them for the whole fortnight, so it just didn't work, unless you were actually a women's centre.

S: My memory of that time is that there was very much an idea that if you were a feminist, you were in a small, local women's liberation group. Maybe that wasn't as true as you thought at the time?

W: I think Leeds was quite exceptional in a way, because we did have a lot of local women's groups. There was Chapeltown, Woodhouse, the town group . . . We did tend to assume rather that every other place in the country was like that.

M: I think we were one of the first local groups, separate from the town group — with

women ten minutes' walk from each other. But we did assume that the way to feminism was through a consciousness-raising group. By the time we were in *WIRES* there was already a shift from c-r to more campaigning things being set up.

A: Ours was c-r, but it wasn't small and closed — any new woman could come along at any time, and sometimes that was quite a mistake . . .

Lives changing

S: What were your lives like at the time?

W: Most of us either had children or were involved in looking after children. Some of us were involved in childcare set-ups, others had 'individual children', as it were!

M: At that time, people used to go to meetings all the time, didn't they?

W: We'd have the women's group, and the health group, and the anti-fascist group, and NAC (National Abortion Campaign) — and that was what we all did all the time, go to meetings, or go to demonstrations.

M: And the rest of the time it was relationships . . . monogamy was not on!

A: And some of us were leaving men . . . becoming lesbians. Nobody Black ever worked at *WIRES*. But in terms of class background it was quite a mixture, and in terms of educational background too.

W: We only did it part-time, all of us — I did two days' childcare, two days' *WIRES*, and got the morning off!

S: Were you paid for your work at *WIRES*?

M: That was one of the things we were pretty strong about. We decided that we didn't like this idea of women working for nothing. So right from the start we made a decision to pay ourselves 50 pence an hour, which, if you think back, wasn't bad, was it? Oh no, it was 30p at first.

A: In one of the early newsletters it says that we hadn't the money to pay people although that was our aim, then it says one woman couldn't go on unless she got £3 per week.

W: It seems a very modest demand, doesn't it?

M: We had the idea that collating and sticking on stamps and everything was shitwork, so it should be paid at 50 pence an hour.

but what we did was more interesting, so that should be paid at 30 pence. But then we realised that in fact collating was quite fun, because we'd all sit together, and we'd chat and the rest of it, no responsibility, so in fact in comparison it had a lot going for it. So at that stage we levelled up to 50 pence an hour. Being paid did make a difference to all of us, and I think it also acted in a way that we treated it like paid work.

W: In other places that I've worked, if I've felt really miserable, I just wouldn't go to work, because you couldn't sit and cry at your desk at the Area Health Authority or whatever, could you? The nice thing about *WIRES* was, you could go along, you could be miserable, and have a good moan, and weep over the duplicating, or whatever it happened to be, and it was OK.

A: It was very supportive . . . there's a lot in the diary about "came in, felt very miserable, stared at the fire . . . then I did some work, felt a lot better. Had a nice talk with so-and-so . . ."

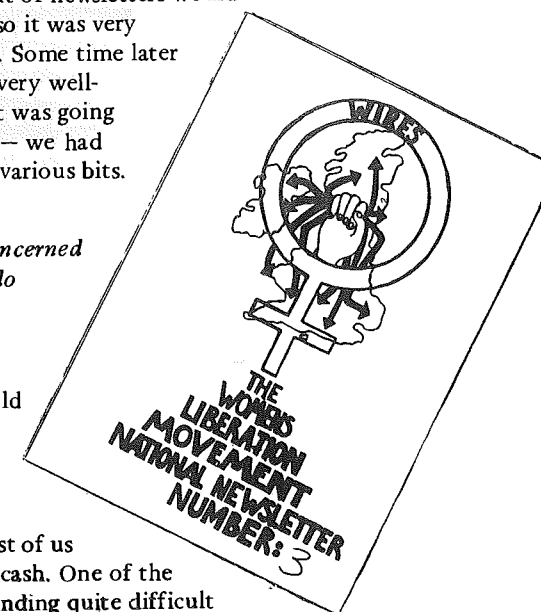
M: I suppose part of it was that we decided we did really want to be there. We'd set it up, and it was completely in our control, all along. And work did get done, I think we worked quite hard, and yet, as I remember it, we did spend a lot of time talking about . . . whatever else. Because a lot of the letters, the things we read out of newsletters would promote discussion, so it was very consciousness-raising. Some time later we realised we were very well-informed about what was going on in the movement — we had our finger on all the various bits.

Skill-sharing

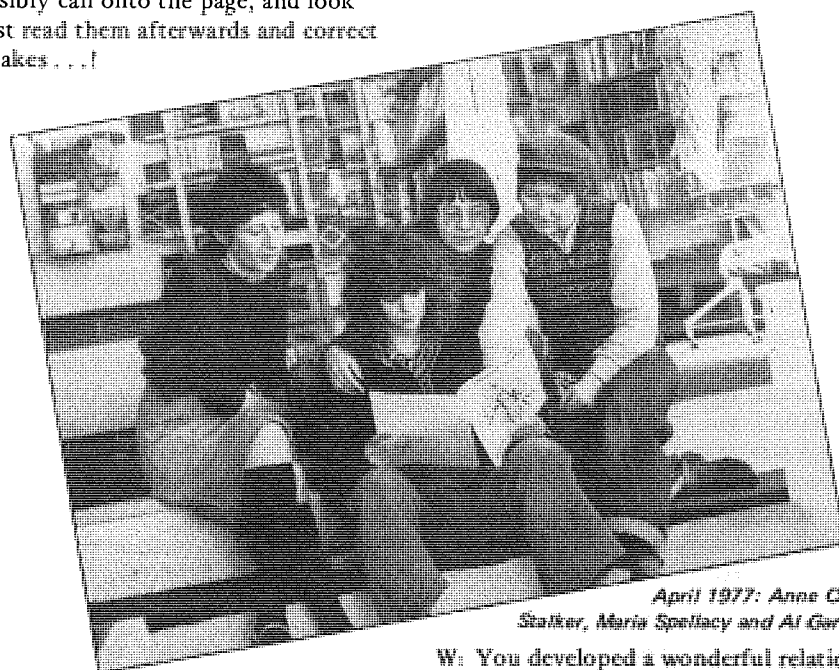
S: Were you very concerned that you should all do everything?

W: Yes!

A: Apart from the accounts. There would be two women who would be responsible for the books at any one time, and the rest of us would just do petty cash. One of the things I remember finding quite difficult was training new women who came in, and



some women came in who hadn't even been in a women's liberation group. It was partly that what we were doing was really quite skilled, but we didn't recognise that, because it wasn't skill that was acknowledged by the system, and partly, I found it difficult at that time to be telling somebody what to do. W: I can remember somebody who typed the stencils really awfully, and I can remember it being really difficult to say — I mean we went on for ages, retyping things that this woman had done, afterwards, before we could actually find a way of saying, look there's no good cramming every single word you possibly can onto the page, and look you must read them afterwards and correct the mistakes . . .!



April 1977: Anne Craig, Liz Stalker, Maria Spillacy and Al Garthwaite.

to do things well but doing them anyway, the main thing was that we were doing them. And in fact it was incredibly positive, we did learn a lot, I think. At our meetings, we were making editorial decisions, we were making long-term plans, we were doing all sorts of things, which in any other context would be seen to be a skill. And we were doing it in a non-hierarchical set-up, tuning it into the pace at which the women in the group were. And some of the women who came in had not done anything — there was me, I was really crummy about duplicating

W: You developed a wonderful relationship with the duplicator, didn't you?

M: Yes, but in the beginning I was absolutely hopeless, and then a year or two later it was easy, it was self-evident.

WIRES and the movement then and now

S: How do you feel about how WIRES has changed? Do you feel you'd do anything different if you were setting it up now?

W: I think it's more that the movement's changed really, so that's reflected in WIRES.

S: How do you see that change?

W: I don't know because I stopped reading it, I'm afraid! I think, when we started it, outside of London, everything was all sweet-

ness and light. We hadn't got to the stage when there were intense political disagreements within the group. I think it's partly as the movement's got bigger — when there were only, say, ten of us in Chapeltown, there wasn't the space to have splits off in all different directions, but as it's got bigger, that's happened everywhere.

S: So do you now involve yourself in local things . . . ?

W: No, I don't do anything at all! I'm not involved in any women's groups at all — it's awful.

S: Was there a particular conflict that made you feel it was more than you could bear?

W: I think at the beginning it was so obvious what to be involved in, you know, there was an abortion campaign because there was a nasty amendment, there was the health group because nobody was doing anything very much. I got to the stage when I was going to have to choose what I was going to get involved in, and I didn't feel able to do it, somehow, and I wasn't . . . once I'd got out of touch, I just found it really difficult to get in touch again. I don't think it was anything in particular.

M: I remember towards the end of WIRES I decided that I couldn't carry on that way. I was married and I was living in a nuclear family, I had a son and a husband — and the women's group was a really important thing for me. But it did seem that I had to get financially independent, and I did get a full-time job. I also got into therapy-type things, I was in a self-help women's therapy group. I feel I'm out of the mainstream, the groups that exist now, like WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women), it never occurred to me to go to a WAVAW meeting.

W: But also, when WAVAW started, I would have been scared to go! There was a time when we were involved in everything, and we knew everybody. Now I don't know the women involved, and it would be like starting again. And that's in some ways just as intimidating as the first time I ever went along to a group. So I haven't been bold enough to do it yet.

M: Basically, in the early days of Chapeltown women's group, what was happening there was what was happening in our lives. Later on, it did seem to get diversified, it did seem

that there were other things as well.

W: I don't think I've got the same energy that I had then, either, perhaps it's age . . . But you still do lots of things, don't you, Al?

S: You still read WIRES?

A: Yes, I sell it, I sell ten copies each time. But sometimes I feel really sad that it doesn't come out more often, because then there would be more letters, and it would be possible to have discussion within it. I remember a couple of years ago there was a really long debate about alcohol and drinking, and it seemed to me that after all this romanticisation of the drunk lesbian stopped. There have been significant things that have come out of it — although sometimes they've been really heavy and women have got totally put off because of that. And some things, I don't think they're meant to read like threats and great anger . . . perhaps it's just women not realising what the effects will be, but it reads like don't dare write in your opinion for fear of being attacked, and rent limb from limb. At the moment I haven't got much energy for projects that are sort of helping things, like Rape Crisis, because I find my life quite exhausting enough.

S: Is that because you've got a young child now?

A: No, we all had children before. I feel I've been looking after children for ten years now, and I'm sick of giving, caring. I'm in a small group which meets once a week, usually, which started off as a WAVAW c-r group, with five of us, and now it's different topics, and I find that really good.

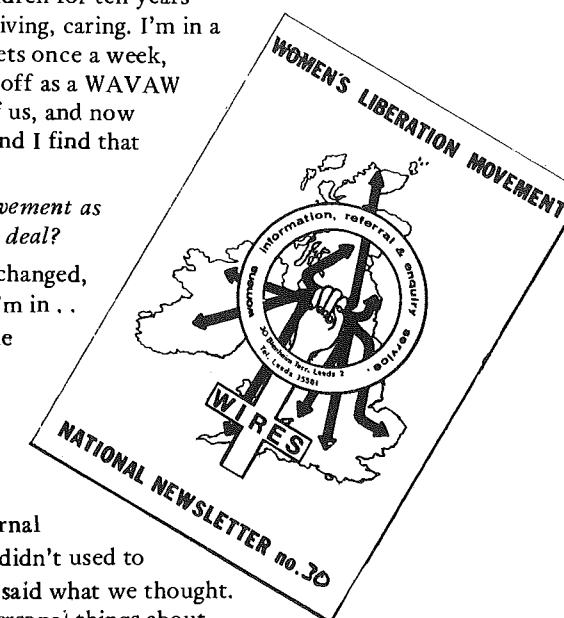
S: Do you see the movement as having changed a great deal?

A: Yes, but then I've changed, and the bit of it that I'm in . . .

I don't want to say 'the movement' — it's just the bit that I feel a part of. I find it really difficult to say anything because this is

going to go into a journal and I'm scared, and I didn't used to be frightened. We just said what we thought. We always disclosed personal things about ourselves, and our political opinions, we

Someone asked us if we'd put more details about the history of the London Women's Liberation Workshop, mentioned briefly last issue. We hope to have an interview with women involved in its early days soon, but in the meantime: the Workshop started out in a woman's living room in February 1970. It moved to an office in Waterloo for four months that June, and returned to another woman's flat until January 1971. It then had an office, till April 1972 in Little Newport Street, WC2, and then at Shavers Place, SW1. It then had five months in two women's centres — Kingsgate and South London — before getting a licenced squat at 38 Earlham Street, also WC2, in October 1973 (not 1974, as we said). It was formed as an umbrella for all the local London groups — which it ceased to be while in Earlham Street — and put out a newsletter and gave out information as, in its reincarnation as A Woman's Place, it still does.



Since WIRES began, it has been passed on to a new collective about every two years. It was in Leeds from September 1975 until December 1977 (issue 43), when it moved to York. It left York for Nottingham in January 1980 (issue 83). Then, in January 1982 (issue 124) Sheffield took it over, where it is today. The Sheffield group are looking for women in another town who would be willing to take it on.

WE MUST
ADDRESS THE
ISSUE OF CLASS!



WE MUST
ADDRESS THE
ISSUE OF RACE!



Cath Jackson

Evelyn Tension, *You don't need a degree to read the writing on the wall*, (1976), reprinted by No Press. Also in Feminist Anthology Collective, *No Turning Back*, (The Women's Press, 1982).

weren't always worrying if it was right-on. And if somebody said I disagree with you, or this is bad, then we talked about it. We got more and more fed up about the attitude of a certain small minority of women in London, because if anything we wrote was open to ambiguity, it was 100% certain they'd take the worst interpretation. But it just feels like that's got to be really general, you know.

W: It was a new experience for us to be attacked, wasn't it? And we were hurt and upset.

A: It's not that I think everyone should be nice, and never disagree, and be like a tea-party or something; but it just does feel so alarming. And I think it's affected me badly.

M: Looking back, it was still very consciousness-raising, "every woman is your sister", and we were trying to see the good in all women. Sounds like a sort of religious thing, but it really was there. I think there was a really strong ethic that women have been treated badly, so you've got to be very careful. If the woman's wrong, then that's a natural outcome of whatever's gone on around her. So to go onto the attack is just adding onto the threat. It didn't feel like we were smothering things down, because, I learnt as a feminist, there *were* differences of power, and all sorts of things, and that was part of it, discovering... There was a really high level of trust, and co-operation, and it felt good to be in that. And then when things did go wrong, they did get solved, and that added to the sense that things were solvable. From my point of view, at some point there was a move away from c-r, to campaigning, getting on with doing it, and then it was almost back to square one, where political lines were being drawn up. There's a gap between the women who've been doing this for years, and those that were new that were coming in. The new women coming in didn't have the benefit of the c-r set-up, so they were taking on the lines, looking up to the women who were saying this is how it was, accepting it, and then spurting it out, without ever having really looked into their own lives about it. It started to become that you had to have the right line on things, and there was less of the women being in touch with their experience. And once that happened,

that builds up distrust, women are watching what they say, in case they get it wrong, because it's no longer safe to get it wrong, because you're going to get dismissed, you're going to be got rid of...

A: Women are going to go on about you in newsletters... not like 'I disagree with your opinion', but as if the whole of you, totally, is worthless, and all you can do is go and jump in the lake because you are just shit.

W: That you *are* your opinion.

A: And it can't be changed.

W: Women used to come along to Chapel-town women's group, who were totally naive, and would say, 'well I don't see what's wrong with this that or the other'. And we wouldn't say, 'oh get out you silly, you don't know what you're talking about'... We'd sit down and talk to them about it, wouldn't we? I can remember women coming along and saying the most appalling things, but we didn't dismiss them.

A: It seems like a shame. As a lesbian... heterosexual women who haven't encountered lesbians all that much are going to be anti-lesbian, and that's how it is. I mean if I'm going to be so incredibly sensitive to every anti-lesbian remark, I'm going to fall down in a heap, I'll never get off the floor. Part of getting together is about getting strong and saying, 'well, so...?' It seems as if (through) the movement we could get together to stop being victims. In a way it's like the movement is now encouraging, glorifying victims — we're not to be victims to men, but we're eternally...

M: ... "I am more victim than thou".

A: We didn't ever say "we are a group of white middle-class" or "white mixed-class", or whatever it might be, in *WIRES*, because that was not the way things were talked about, but there was a consciousness of it there, I feel, from reading the newsletters. And getting things wrong, and probably being oppressive in various ways we weren't aware of...

Working class consciousness

M: Like the class thing: I remember reading *You don't need a degree to read the writing on the wall* when I was at *WIRES*, and I loved it, and I thought, this is absolutely

fantastic. There wasn't an understanding of class then, and as a working class woman, I had to struggle along with that. I remember in the Chapel-town women's group when I said I wanted to talk about class one woman telling me what class was about, and me feeling, I'm sure it's important, but I had no means with which to say why it was important. But for me, although the women's group was predominantly middle class, if we add up who's who, it wasn't *all* middle class. The other things compensated; even if I was in a middle class setting, with middle class assumptions and all that, which I was struggling against, compared to the rest of my life it was a real treat! The anti-thing, of having other women be your enemy, other women represent a power over you, that just felt really alien — I'd hate it, if I was... So although the working class thing was starting, and I could understand it, I couldn't really relate to it as a lot of women seemed to be doing, and being very angry at their sisters. And I used to put it down to London again... it was as if the London women were down a hole and were dragging all the rest of us down with them, and I didn't want to go — I wanted the place where I was learning to grow. That's why I stayed being a part of the movement, because I was finally getting to do things with my life, and that's what, for me, feminism was about. I'm not sure that I can comment on how *WIRES* has changed, outwardly — within *WIRES* it meant a lot to us to be working in that way, it did seem a feminist way.

Realising what we'd done

S: How has it changed your lives?

W: Well I think I've got a lot more self-confident. And I think I'd always assumed that if I could do something, then it wasn't of any value. I thought everybody knew how to work a duplicator, because if I know how to work a duplicator, then it must be common knowledge! And if I could write things, and co-ordinate things, then that must be something anybody could do...

M: With me, I was married, lived in a nuclear family, and now I'm not. I live on my own, and I'm surrounded by other women who live nearby, so apart from my work, I lead a quite separatist life, and that feels very positive. That wasn't *WIRES*,

that was part of the process, I think.

A: I think it gave you confidence to think you could do a job like the CAB (Citizens Advice Bureau).

W: Because you'd never had a paid job, had you?

M: I definitely see feminism as something that got me together — I was lucky. *WIRES* solidified all that. Having that very supportive atmosphere was very good.

A: It's made me dissatisfied with doing any other jobs! I think it really was the ideal working situation. I was still with men, but I was basically leaving then, I don't know whether I was sleeping with women or not, but I was still living in a mixed household, and during the course of working at *WIRES* I began to live in a women-only household. It gave me enough faith in women, I think, to realise that I could do it. But I was still quite seeking of male approval, I think, at the beginning of working at *WIRES* — though very angry at the same time, like you are when you're seeking someone's approval, and you're conscious of it. I thought I couldn't do things if there weren't men there, and it really finally showed to me that I could.

M: I think you brought in achieving, proving to the lefty men that women could do it just as good as men, that they could actually be a political force.

A: Yes, I was in a left group, Big Flame.

W: I think when we realised what we'd done, that was a real boost to our confidence; we had set up this national newsletter, and we'd done it completely from scratch, and all these years later, here it still is, you know! □

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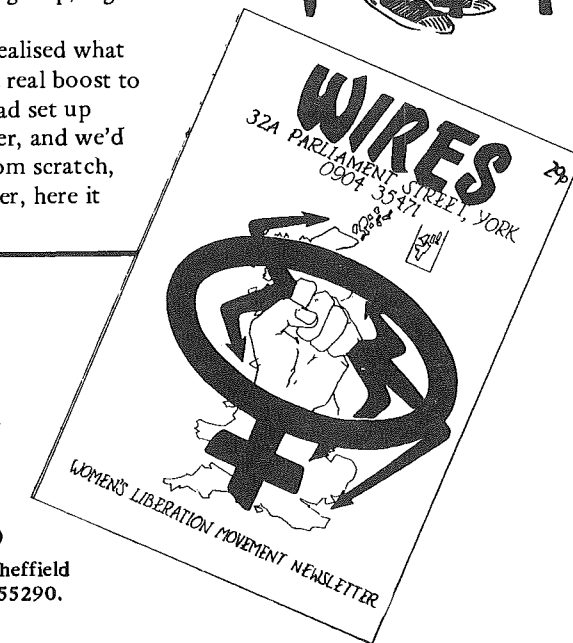
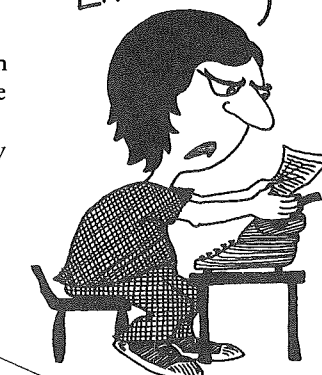
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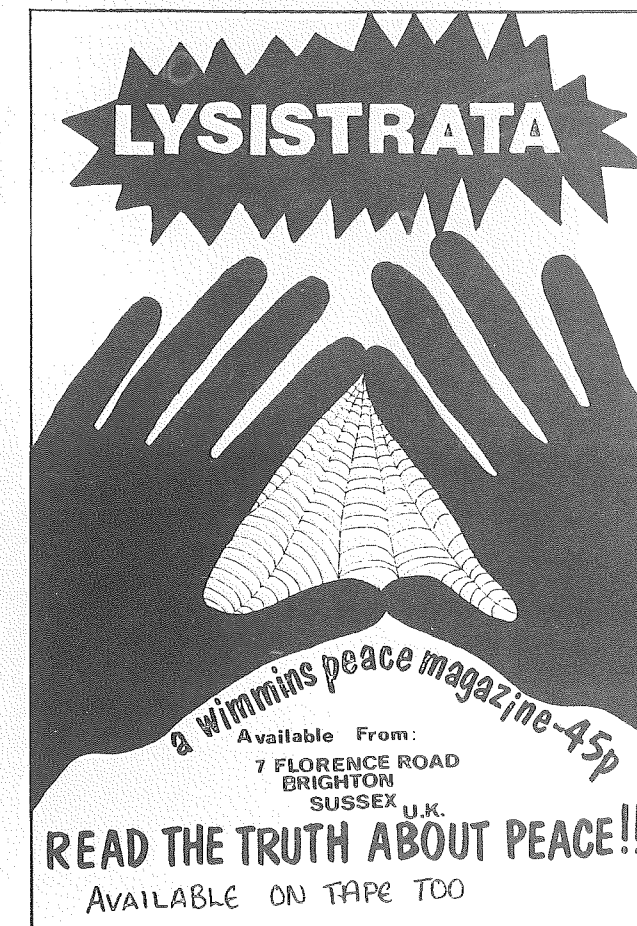
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Letters: Greenham is a feminist issue; no 'christian' names; class, money and more	2
Writing For My Mother <i>Pearlie McNeill</i>	8
The New Myth of the Witch <i>Rachel Hasted</i>	10
Enemies of God or Victims of Patriarchy? <i>Lynette Mitchell</i>	18
For 'thrill-seeking females' only — <i>Scum Manifesto</i> revisited <i>Jayne Egerton</i>	21
What's the French for 'political lesbian'? <i>Claire Duchen</i> with translated pieces by 'Monique', <i>Marie-Jo Davernas</i> , <i>Radical Lesbians of Jussieu</i> and <i>Nouvelles Questions Feministes</i>	24
<i>Born in Flames</i> : an interview with Lizzie Borden <i>Sharon Roughan</i>	35
Women's liberation/left split in the National Abortion Campaign: whose right to choose? <i>Alice Henry</i>	39
Have you heard the one about sisterhood? Class and race in the <i>Quest</i> anthology <i>Dena Attar</i>	43
Review: <i>Breaching the Peace</i> <i>Pam Muttram</i>	47
Writing Our Own History: Interview with Wendy Collins, Al Garthwaite and Maria Spellacy, three of the first <i>WIRES</i> workers.	48

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