## Isobel Grundy, 'How to start a Women's Studies Group'

Ever wanted to know how to start a feminist network? In the first of a new series of posts reflecting on the history of the Women's Studies Group 1558-1837 and celebrating the publication of our book <u>Exploring the Lives of Women (Pen & Sword, 2018)</u>, member <u>Isobel Grundy</u> recalls the first formation of the group.

I said I would provide brief reminiscences about the early days of WSG but none would have emerged if I hadn't, after more than a decade as a Professor Emeritus, been asked to clear out my office at the University of Alberta and move into a less splendid one which lacks the coveted river-valley view. I did some weeding out, and I found a file. Memory stopped coursing and poured out its material.

How it all comes back! The typefaces alone, which look curiously amateur today. The continuous typing paper, like reading from a concertina. People's comments on getting to grips with their Amstrad. In those days a student worried about whether Anne Finch was a major figure enough to choose as special author on an MA course. In those days papers I gave, and articles I published, all referred – as did those of others – to the fact that our audience would be unfamiliar with our material. We were in the vanguard of a new direction for literary study, and we loved it. But as the poet Anne Stevenson writes: "We thought we were living now, / But we were living then."

Nineteen women came to a pilot meeting at the Institute of Historical Research on 7 January 1987 (the month that Gorbachev enunciated his principle of *perestroika*, a month with publications by Karen Gershon, Mary Stott, and (in translation) Nawal El Saadawi). The nineteen were Vicky Assling, Ros Ballaster, Jean Bloch, Clare Brant, Janet Bowne, Morag Buchan, Estelle Cohen, Maidie Collins, Laura Corballis, Mioko Fujieda, Eithne Henson, Ludmilla Jordanova, Sarah Lambert, Jessica Munns, Yvonne Noble, Penelope Richards, Judy Simons, Carolyn Williams, and myself. We agreed to meet on the last Saturday of alternate months; advice was offered about British Rail Family Railcards. After that meeting Yvonne Noble put out a pilot newsletter, typed by hand on continuous computer paper.

By summer 1990, when I left London for Edmonton, Canada, the Women's Studies Group 1500-1825 (as it was then called) was closely linked with other feminist networks, particularly the vigorous Northern Network. The newsletter was up to no. 25. A register of members was compiled, the whole consisting of 45 neatly stapled pages with a coloured cover. My own bio there reminds me that Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and I had to fight off a last-minute attempt by Yale University Press marketing department to take the word "feminist" out of the title of <u>The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present</u> (1990).

A year after WSG's pilot meeting, in January 1988, I spoke to the group on women writing about Eve. That month we listed our total income and expenses: 1339 sheets of computer paper set us back £22.69. It was a £20 contribution from Basil Blackwell

publishers that kept us afloat. The same month, too, we listed our members, and our self-descriptions are still fun to read. Asked to enumerate what support we could give the group, many of us cheerfully offered information, advice, reading of drafts, "clues to follow up", "help in reading 16c German books", or "ideas on what sex was for".

Our first Day School was held at Birkbeck College on 30 April 1988, on "The Construction and Representation of the Female Self". Members were exhorted to "Please try hard to come!" and meanwhile to decorate the flier and display it eyecatchingly. I count the list of day-school participants at 44, including many who have been important in my own life and networks: Linda Bree, Marilyn Brooks, Lois Chaber, Inga-Stina Ewbank, Phyllis Guskin, Tom and Margaret Healy, Elaine Hobby, Vivien Jones, Margaret Kirkham, Marie Roberts, Christine Salmon, Jonathan Sawday, Jane Spencer, and Mary Waldron.

The prompt reminds me how actively the Group was involved in the annual meetings, beginning in 1988, of the <u>British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies</u> (BSECS). Yvonne Noble was a stalwart communicator and organiser through all problems and setbacks. She found some of her colleagues flaky (not the word we used then); the names of Janet Todd and Olwen Hufton were omitted from the 1988 BSECS programme, though they were speaking (under the Group's auspices) in connection with the conference, and "the bigwigs from the BSECS meeting did not care to stay on and cross the street to hear" them. At ordinary Group meetings, too, attendance by now often reached forty, but Yvonne said she was always terrified that nobody would show up at all.

She went on to correspond with the <u>International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies</u> (ISECS) about the programme for the meeting at Bristol in 1991. No, she did not mean "feminine", wrote Yvonne, she meant "feminist" – and to members of the group she reported this tactfully as "cultural misunderstanding". This brings up a personal memory of how the same quarter once offered me the topic of "women's writing about female fickleness and inconstancy", and seemed surprised when I replied that women had written a lot more about the fickleness and inconstancy of men.

We listened to some wonderful presentations. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, editors of *Her Own Life*, the pioneering anthology of seventeenth-century women's life-writing, spoke about it when it was still hot off the press. Olwen Hufton's BSECS-linked talk on women in the French Revolution, as the Group's report tartly observed, seemed to be about a different revolution from the one mentioned elsewhere at BSECS, which had plainly "taken place in a country and century in which no woman seemed to have been alive!". Ludmilla Jordanova supplied her talk on "The Mother" with mind-blowing illustrations.

After opening and going through that long-ignored file, I am left with just a slightly brighter, clearer version of what memory had supplied: faces, names, gestures, topics. Those were heady times, because we stood on the brink of exploring and coming to know a whole field of early(ish) women's history and writing. Wild surmises then have become almost commonplaces now. I had already been working

on the *Feminist Companion* for several years, so before the WSG was created I had shed my near-total ignorance of 1980. But that creation happened at a time of great intellectual excitement, with a gathering of extraordinarily able scholars, who knew we could play a part in changing the whole approach to literary study.

That time of intellectual ferment gave birth to other organizations, to other events marked by warm and eager exchange of views, to several still-flourishing journals, to an impressive array of monographs about each of which one might wonder, how did anybody understand anything before that was published? In time it gave birth to the <u>Orlando Project</u>, daughter of the *Feminist Companion*, with its textbase still regularly revised and updated by Cambridge University Press.

After moving to Canada I attended far fewer WSG meetings. But the group is part of a great communal movement which directed, for me as well as for many others, a whole career path and a system of supportive relationships. It helped to shape my way of thinking, and for that I remain deeply grateful.

Ever wanted to know how to start a feminist network? In the first of a new series of posts reflecting on the history of the Women's Studies Group 1558-1837 and celebrating the publication of our book <u>Exploring the Lives of Women</u> (Pen & Sword, 2018), member <u>Isobel Grundy</u> recalls the first formation of the group.

I said I would provide brief reminiscences about the early days of WSG but none would have emerged if I hadn't, after more than a decade as a Professor Emeritus, been asked to clear out my office at the University of Alberta and move into a less splendid one which lacks the coveted river-valley view. I did some weeding out, and I found a file. Memory stopped corpsing and poured out its material.

How it all comes back! The typefaces alone, which look curiously amateur today. The continuous typing paper, like reading from a concertina. People's comments on getting to grips with their Amstrad. In those days a student worried about whether Anne Finch was a major figure enough to choose as special author on an MA course. In those days papers I gave, and articles I published, all referred – as did those of others – to the fact that our audience would be unfamiliar with our material. We were in the vanguard of a new direction for literary study, and we loved it. But as the poet Anne Stevenson writes: "We thought we were living now, / But we were living then."

Nineteen women came to a pilot meeting at the Institute of Historical Research on 7 January 1987 (the month that Gorbachev enunciated his principle of *perestroika*, a month with publications by Karen Gershon, Mary Stott, and (in translation) Nawal El Saadawi). The nineteen were Vicky Assling, Ros Ballaster, Jean Bloch, Clare Brant, Janet Bowne, Morag Buchan, Estelle Cohen, Maidie Collins, Laura Corballis, Mioko Fujieda, Eithne Henson, Ludmilla Jordanova, Sarah Lambert, Jessica Munns, Yvonne Noble, Penelope Richards, Judy Simons, Carolyn Williams, and myself. We agreed to meet on the last Saturday of alternate months; advice was offered about

British Rail Family Railcards. After that meeting Yvonne Noble put out a pilot newsletter, typed by hand on continuous computer paper.

By summer 1990, when I left London for Edmonton, Canada, the Women's Studies Group 1500-1825 (as it was then called) was closely linked with other feminist networks, particularly the vigorous Northern Network. The newsletter was up to no. 25. A register of members was compiled, the whole consisting of 45 neatly stapled pages with a coloured cover. My own bio there reminds me that Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and I had to fight off a last-minute attempt by Yale University Press marketing department to take the word "feminist" out of the title of <u>The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present</u> (1990).

A year after WSG's pilot meeting, in January 1988, I spoke to the group on women writing about Eve. That month we listed our total income and expenses: 1339 sheets of computer paper set us back £22.69. It was a £20 contribution from Basil Blackwell publishers that kept us afloat. The same month, too, we listed our members, and our self-descriptions are still fun to read. Asked to enumerate what support we could give the group, many of us cheerfully offered information, advice, reading of drafts, "clues to follow up", "help in reading 16c German books", or "ideas on what sex was for".

Our first Day School was held at Birkbeck College on 30 April 1988, on "The Construction and Representation of the Female Self". Members were exhorted to "Please try hard to come!" and meanwhile to decorate the flier and display it eyecatchingly. I count the list of day-school participants at 44, including many who have been important in my own life and networks: Linda Bree, Marilyn Brooks, Lois Chaber, Inga-Stina Ewbank, Phyllis Guskin, Tom and Margaret Healy, Elaine Hobby, Vivien Jones, Margaret Kirkham, Marie Roberts, Christine Salmon, Jonathan Sawday, Jane Spencer, and Mary Waldron.

The prompt reminds me how actively the Group was involved in the annual meetings, beginning in 1988, of the <u>British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies</u> (BSECS). Yvonne Noble was a stalwart communicator and organiser through all problems and setbacks. She found some of her colleagues flaky (not the word we used then); the names of Janet Todd and Olwen Hufton were omitted from the 1988 BSECS programme, though they were speaking (under the Group's auspices) in connection with the conference, and "the bigwigs from the BSECS meeting did not care to stay on and cross the street to hear" them. At ordinary Group meetings, too, attendance by now often reached forty, but Yvonne said she was always terrified that nobody would show up at all.

She went on to correspond with the <u>International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies</u> (ISECS) about the programme for the meeting at Bristol in 1991. No, she did not mean "feminine", wrote Yvonne, she meant "feminist" – and to members of the group she reported this tactfully as "cultural misunderstanding". This brings up a personal memory of how the same quarter once offered me the topic of "women's writing about female fickleness and inconstancy", and seemed surprised when I

replied that women had written a lot more about the fickleness and inconstancy of men.

We listened to some wonderful presentations. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, editors of <u>Her Own Life</u>, the pioneering anthology of seventeenth-century women's life-writing, spoke about it when it was still hot off the press. Olwen Hufton's BSECS-linked talk on women in the French Revolution, as the Group's report tartly observed, seemed to be about a different revolution from the one mentioned elsewhere at BSECS, which had plainly "taken place in a country and century in which no woman seemed to have been alive!". Ludmilla Jordanova supplied her talk on "The Mother" with mind-blowing illustrations.

After opening and going through that long-ignored file, I am left with just a slightly brighter, clearer version of what memory had supplied: faces, names, gestures, topics. Those were heady times, because we stood on the brink of exploring and coming to know a whole field of early(ish) women's history and writing. Wild surmises then have become almost commonplaces now. I had already been working on the *Feminist Companion* for several years, so before the WSG was created I had shed my near-total ignorance of 1980. But that creation happened at a time of great intellectual excitement, with a gathering of extraordinarily able scholars, who knew we could play a part in changing the whole approach to literary study.

That time of intellectual ferment gave birth to other organizations, to other events marked by warm and eager exchange of views, to several still-flourishing journals, to an impressive array of monographs about each of which one might wonder, how did anybody understand anything before that was published? In time it gave birth to the <u>Orlando Project</u>, daughter of the *Feminist Companion*, with its textbase still regularly revised and updated by Cambridge University Press.

After moving to Canada I attended far fewer WSG meetings. But the group is part of a great communal movement which directed, for me as well as for many others, a whole career path and a system of supportive relationships. It helped to shape my way of thinking, and for that I remain deeply grateful.

Ever wanted to know how to start a feminist network? In the first of a new series of posts reflecting on the history of the Women's Studies Group 1558-1837 and celebrating the publication of our book <u>Exploring the Lives of Women (Pen & Sword, 2018)</u>, member <u>Isobel Grundy</u> recalls the first formation of the group.

I said I would provide brief reminiscences about the early days of WSG but none would have emerged if I hadn't, after more than a decade as a Professor Emeritus, been asked to clear out my office at the University of Alberta and move into a less splendid one which lacks the coveted river-valley view. I did some weeding out, and I found a file. Memory stopped corpsing and poured out its material.

How it all comes back! The typefaces alone, which look curiously amateur today. The continuous typing paper, like reading from a concertina. People's comments on

getting to grips with their Amstrad. In those days a student worried about whether Anne Finch was a major figure enough to choose as special author on an MA course. In those days papers I gave, and articles I published, all referred – as did those of others – to the fact that our audience would be unfamiliar with our material. We were in the vanguard of a new direction for literary study, and we loved it. But as the poet Anne Stevenson writes: "We thought we were living now, / But we were living then."

Nineteen women came to a pilot meeting at the Institute of Historical Research on 7 January 1987 (the month that Gorbachev enunciated his principle of *perestroika*, a month with publications by Karen Gershon, Mary Stott, and (in translation) Nawal El Saadawi). The nineteen were Vicky Assling, Ros Ballaster, Jean Bloch, Clare Brant, Janet Bowne, Morag Buchan, Estelle Cohen, Maidie Collins, Laura Corballis, Mioko Fujieda, Eithne Henson, Ludmilla Jordanova, Sarah Lambert, Jessica Munns, Yvonne Noble, Penelope Richards, Judy Simons, Carolyn Williams, and myself. We agreed to meet on the last Saturday of alternate months; advice was offered about British Rail Family Railcards. After that meeting Yvonne Noble put out a pilot newsletter, typed by hand on continuous computer paper.

By summer 1990, when I left London for Edmonton, Canada, the Women's Studies Group 1500-1825 (as it was then called) was closely linked with other feminist networks, particularly the vigorous Northern Network. The newsletter was up to no. 25. A register of members was compiled, the whole consisting of 45 neatly stapled pages with a coloured cover. My own bio there reminds me that Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and I had to fight off a last-minute attempt by Yale University Press marketing department to take the word "feminist" out of the title of <u>The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present</u> (1990).

A year after WSG's pilot meeting, in January 1988, I spoke to the group on women writing about Eve. That month we listed our total income and expenses: 1339 sheets of computer paper set us back £22.69. It was a £20 contribution from Basil Blackwell publishers that kept us afloat. The same month, too, we listed our members, and our self-descriptions are still fun to read. Asked to enumerate what support we could give the group, many of us cheerfully offered information, advice, reading of drafts, "clues to follow up", "help in reading 16c German books", or "ideas on what sex was for".

Our first Day School was held at Birkbeck College on 30 April 1988, on "The Construction and Representation of the Female Self". Members were exhorted to "Please try hard to come!" and meanwhile to decorate the flier and display it eyecatchingly. I count the list of day-school participants at 44, including many who have been important in my own life and networks: Linda Bree, Marilyn Brooks, Lois Chaber, Inga-Stina Ewbank, Phyllis Guskin, Tom and Margaret Healy, Elaine Hobby, Vivien Jones, Margaret Kirkham, Marie Roberts, Christine Salmon, Jonathan Sawday, Jane Spencer, and Mary Waldron.

The prompt reminds me how actively the Group was involved in the annual meetings, beginning in 1988, of the <u>British Society for Eighteenth-Century</u>

Studies (BSECS). Yvonne Noble was a stalwart communicator and organiser through all problems and setbacks. She found some of her colleagues flaky (not the word we used then); the names of Janet Todd and Olwen Hufton were omitted from the 1988 BSECS programme, though they were speaking (under the Group's auspices) in connection with the conference, and "the bigwigs from the BSECS meeting did not care to stay on and cross the street to hear" them. At ordinary Group meetings, too, attendance by now often reached forty, but Yvonne said she was always terrified that nobody would show up at all.

She went on to correspond with the <u>International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies</u> (ISECS) about the programme for the meeting at Bristol in 1991. No, she did not mean "feminine", wrote Yvonne, she meant "feminist" – and to members of the group she reported this tactfully as "cultural misunderstanding". This brings up a personal memory of how the same quarter once offered me the topic of "women's writing about female fickleness and inconstancy", and seemed surprised when I replied that women had written a lot more about the fickleness and inconstancy of men.

We listened to some wonderful presentations. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, editors of <u>Her Own Life</u>, the pioneering anthology of seventeenth-century women's life-writing, spoke about it when it was still hot off the press. Olwen Hufton's BSECS-linked talk on women in the French Revolution, as the Group's report tartly observed, seemed to be about a different revolution from the one mentioned elsewhere at BSECS, which had plainly "taken place in a country and century in which no woman seemed to have been alive!". Ludmilla Jordanova supplied her talk on "The Mother" with mind-blowing illustrations.

After opening and going through that long-ignored file, I am left with just a slightly brighter, clearer version of what memory had supplied: faces, names, gestures, topics. Those were heady times, because we stood on the brink of exploring and coming to know a whole field of early(ish) women's history and writing. Wild surmises then have become almost commonplaces now. I had already been working on the *Feminist Companion* for several years, so before the WSG was created I had shed my near-total ignorance of 1980. But that creation happened at a time of great intellectual excitement, with a gathering of extraordinarily able scholars, who knew we could play a part in changing the whole approach to literary study.

That time of intellectual ferment gave birth to other organizations, to other events marked by warm and eager exchange of views, to several still-flourishing journals, to an impressive array of monographs about each of which one might wonder, how did anybody understand anything before that was published? In time it gave birth to the <u>Orlando Project</u>, daughter of the *Feminist Companion*, with its textbase still regularly revised and updated by Cambridge University Press.

After moving to Canada I attended far fewer WSG meetings. But the group is part of a great communal movement which directed, for me as well as for many others, a whole career path and a system of supportive relationships. It helped to shape my way of thinking, and for that I remain deeply grateful.