

## Exploring the Lives of Women 1558–1837: celebrating thirty years of collaboration

*Louise Duckling reflects on the collegial traditions of WSG and, in particular, its history of collaborative publication, which cumulated in the launch of the group's latest book last year.*



*Exploring the Lives of Women on display at the book launch in Dec 2018*

My first encounter with the Women's Studies Group was in 1996. I had just begun (rather ambitiously) a part-time PhD at the University of Essex while working full-time as a media analyst. My PhD supervisor was Elaine Jordan, a passionate proponent of feminism and gender studies in literature. She was also a great believer in the importance of creativity, scholarly networks and the simple pleasure of loving what you do. Unsurprisingly—given their common values—Elaine introduced me to WSG by sharing the 1996–97 seminar programme (featuring Marilyn Butler and Jacqueline Labbe as speakers) and subsequently keeping me up to date with group events. I was finally able to become an active WSG member, following a career change, in January 2001.

One of the earliest seminars that I attended was in June 2001 and the speaker was WSG committee member Mary Waldron. The paper was auspiciously entitled “A Very Different Kind of Patronage: Ann Yearsley's New Friends”; within a year, Mary had become a new friend and a special kind of patron to me. As a Visiting Fellow at the University of Essex, Mary wanted to be of practical use in the department and so, in 2002, I acquired an additional informal supervisor. I gained enormously—as did so many of us at WSG—from her incisive comments and breadth of knowledge.

Mary's support encapsulated the generosity of the group and its community spirit. By May 2003, when I was invited to join the organising committee, I naturally welcomed the opportunity to give back something in return. During my time on the committee (2003–2017) there were some exciting changes within the group. In 2003, WSG hosted the first of its [popular workshops](#) (with keynote speaker Helen King talking on “The Reproductive Cycle: Menstruation, Pregnancy, Childbirth and Lactation”) and the seminar programme was relaunched (with fewer sessions featuring multiple speakers). For my own part, I really enjoyed sharing some of the skills gleaned from my professional life in marketing, working on publicity for the group and establishing an online presence.

Over its thirty-year history, the WSG has continually evolved; however, its core commitment has always been to support and promote the work of its members and this fact is evident in the group's history of collaborative publication. Our edited essay collections, in book and journal form, provide a permanent record of the group's activities and showcase our members' research. In each volume, the majority of articles were first given as papers at WSG events, augmented with contributions by other group members responding to our internal calls for papers.

The first publication was a special issue of *Women's Writing* (Volume 8, 2001 – [Issue 2](#), introduced by Carol Banks and Anne Kelley). This project evolved from WSG's 1998 Day School on "The Body and Women" and featured a wide range of topics, ranging from [Elaine Hobby](#) on midwifery to Myra Cottingham on Felicia Hemans's "dead and dying bodies". When Mary Waldron died, in 2006, Carolyn D. Williams was the energetic catalyst for two further publications that were inspired by and dedicated to Mary. The first of these emerged from the [2008 workshop](#) and was another special issue of *Women's Writing*, this time celebrating "edgy" women (Volume 17, 2010 – [Issue 1: Women Out Loud](#), with managing editors Vicki Joule, Daniel Grey and Sarah Oliver). It included some fabulous characters, including two articles (by Kerri Andrews and Claire Knowles) on the subject of Mary's research, the labouring-class 'milkmaid poet' Ann Yearsley. The second festschrift for Mary was [Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations During the Long Eighteenth Century](#) (University of Delaware Press, 2010), which I had the great pleasure of co-editing with Carolyn D. Williams and Angela Escott. Fittingly, for a work by WSG dedicated to Mary Waldron, the book's theme was female collaboration. The essays were grouped into three core themes—family alliances, friends and companions, adventurous women—and included contributions from Jennie Batchelor and Judith Hawley.

We enjoyed two memorable launch events for our 2010 publications, with Ron Waldron (Mary's husband) attending as guest of honour. The *Women's Writing* special issue was launched at a champagne reception in June 2010 at Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge, hosted by the journal's co-founders Janet Todd and Marie Mulvey Roberts to coincide with their "Celebrating Women's Writing" conference. It was wonderful that so many WSG members were able to attend, given the [long association](#) between the group and the journal. In October 2010 Lois Chaber hosted another splendid gathering for WSG members at her London home to mark the publication of *Woman to Woman*.

By a fortunate stroke of serendipity, the ideas for these publishing ventures were conceived around the time of WSG's tenth and twentieth birthdays. However, in 2016—with our thirtieth anniversary approaching—[Sara Read](#) proposed a deliberate strategy: to officially celebrate this important milestone in print. The result was our latest book, [Exploring the Lives of Women, 1558–1837](#) (Pen & Sword History, 2018), a rich collection of essays sourced from WSG members and edited by myself, Sara Read, Felicity Roberts and Carolyn D. Williams.

As Carolyn notes, 'the thirtieth year has a particularly organic appeal, because it measures a generation' (Introduction, *Exploring*, p.xix). As a celebration of the group's ability to survive and thrive over its thirty-year existence, the editorial objective of the book was to reflect the essential qualities of WSG and the many and varied interests of our members. Unlike our previous publications, which focused on a single theme, it therefore provides an expansive, wide-ranging view of women from all walks of life—

featuring opera singers and mine workers, queens and prostitutes—within an accessible and affordable volume.



Contributors to *Exploring the Lives of Women*

On December 8, 2018, *Exploring the Lives of Women* was formally launched at WSG's thirtieth anniversary seminar at [The Foundling Museum](#), London. This was a convivial and inclusive occasion, with attendees aged from 8 months to 80 years old and guests travelling from as far afield as the US. The one great sadness was that one of our authors, long-term member Marion Durnin, died very shortly before the event. The seminar was a timely opportunity to remember and celebrate Marion's significant contribution to WSG and to the book (which includes her last published work) in the company of her husband Kevin and son Owen.

While the launch provided an opportunity to reflect upon and commemorate the group's history and achievements over a generation, the key theme of the event was "Women's and Gender Studies in 2018 and Beyond". This focus reflects WSG's forward-thinking philosophy, equally evident in the decision to use all proceeds from sales of the book to fund the group's popular [bursary scheme](#), thereby supporting future research in the field.

I was privileged to open the event with an illustrated talk, describing how the editorial team sourced the public domain images included in the book's generous plate section, before using these images to describe and celebrate each author's contribution. The next paper was delivered by our guest speaker Professor [Bernadette Andrea](#) (University of California, Santa Barbara). An expert on English women and Islam in early modern English literature, Bernadette introduced us to a unique narrative: Elizabeth Marsh's *The Female Captive* (1769), the first full-length account of Maghrebian captivity written by an Englishwoman. Bernadette provided close readings from the text to illustrate Marsh's "sartorial negotiations" which delicately balance her abjection as a female English captive with her apparent assimilation to Moroccan gender norms. The final speaker, [Felicity Roberts](#), provided a stimulating and thought-provoking talk on the issue of precarity in academia, considering issues relating to gender and marginalisation, alongside a personal and polemical view on the practical ways in which WSG could provide enhanced support to its members in the future.

One of the emerging trends within the group has been its desire to embrace the creativity of our members, demonstrated perfectly by WSG's very first [creative seminar](#) scheduled for August 2019. This tendency is also reflected in *Exploring the Lives of Women*, which features two poems: 'Gretchen's Answer' by [Tabitha Kenlon](#) and 'Stilts' by author and performer [Jacqueline Mulhallen](#). At our thirtieth anniversary event, Jacqueline entertained us all with a recital of 'Stilts': this was recorded by [William Alderson](#) and we are delighted to be able to share [a video](#) of the performance.

To conclude the event, it was fitting that the final words should be reserved for the personal reminiscences of long-term supporter Lois Chaber, who gave an honest and entertaining account of her life within the group and its [evolution](#), and WSG founder member Yvonne Noble. Yvonne Noble wonderfully [described](#) how and why the WSG was founded as a support network, and urged us all to continue to work together to support the group and reach out to those who may benefit from its collegial spirit.

When I was urged to join WSG, almost twenty years ago, I expected to find friendship and community. Yet professionally and intellectually it has exceeded my expectations. As an independent scholar, WSG has given me an unrivalled opportunity to publish my own work, collaborate with others and benefit from the significant skills, knowledge and experience of my co-editors. WSG will continue to flourish in the coming decade and I am certain there will be plenty to celebrate in its fortieth year—and perhaps there will even be another book?