

Who can start a women's studies group? By WSF founder Yvonne Noble

After the [first](#) guest post by Isobel Grundy in our new series reflecting on the history of the Women's Studies Group 1558-1837, and celebrating the publication of our book [Exploring the Lives of Women](#) (Pen & Sword, 2018), you might be wondering who can start a women's studies society, reading group, activist organisation... Well, anyone who feels the need for one can. Find your people, dig where you stand. In this post WSG founder Yvonne Noble explains her decision to start the group and argues for the importance of scholarly community.

Like many Americans of my generation, I come from a small town—right over the hill, four miles from Clairton, Pennsylvania, where the beginning of *The Deer Hunter* is set. College was a liberation and graduate school, study that could continue the encounter with literature that I had come to love, at last put me into a congenial community. It took many years before I understood that I should prepare myself for a profession, but finally I proceeded quite successfully with good credentials and tenure at a very good university. When, fifteen years after most of my contemporaries, I found myself with the husband, children, and house that the 1950s had imagined, except located in England, confident of my competence and armed with imperfect advice, I resigned my tenure and found myself right back in the boots of the sixteen-year-old who has had a baby too soon—that is, with no job and therefore no funds to enable me to complete my research. And no colleagues.

My dissertation had been an edition of *The Beggar's Opera*. I had had a lot of trouble because at that time the principles of editing words and editing music were almost opposite, and people in different fields tended not to talk to each other. I was therefore an enthusiastic participant at the founding of the first (the International) Society for [Interdisciplinary] Eighteenth-Century Studies at St. Andrews in 1967. In my isolation in England, the three days of the local affiliate (BSECS) was my only time of professional contact. In their original conception the SECS societies required that all sections of the meeting be interdisciplinary, and it was found that two new fields—garden history and women's studies—could most easily provide such interdisciplinary sessions. I was very interested to follow both fields, and I began to track where they overlapped, especially in the imaginative arts. (I had taught *Paradise Lost* and *Clarissa* and had ideas about the relationship of women and gardens.)

On this basis, supported by Ludmilla Jordanova, someone also interested in gendered imagery, whom I had met through BSECS, I obtained an unfunded but psychologically very valuable fellowship to the Bunting Institute at Harvard, in a program aimed to give a boost to women scholars whose careers had been impaired. There were more than forty of us in a year. We all in turn told our stories—and it was always the same tale. (This is all a commonplace of feminism, but it is always new to each individual woman.) The lesson, of course, was that our difficulties were not largely owing to our own inadequacy, and that it was important to have associates and colleagues.

With this necessity in mind, at the next BSECS meeting I attended, I called a pilot meeting to explore there being a group for women's studies. I remember Jessica

Munns and her sister Penny Richards being there—Penny has worked in 16th century history, hence our extension to include that period in the group. I didn't keep a record of the others who came just then, but Isobel Grundy and Carolyn Williams were certainly members very soon, as well as Jean Bloch (in French at Royal Holloway), who interceded to arrange our meeting rooms at the University of London's Senate House. Not long after Isobel brought in two mature students of hers, Mary Waldren and Linda Bree.

Our first session at the Senate House was on gendered imagery in Erasmus Darwin by Janet Browne, who went on to edit Charles Darwin (and never returned to us, though it was she who suggested that we name ourselves a "group.") We tried to have single hour-long talks each month. Many times we also held Day Schools on a particular theme—I remember Marilyn Brooks holding one on 'Appropriations of Power' in Cambridge, and Marie Roberts (as was then) on the Gothic (with Devendra Varma in Mourning Dress). My favourite was a two-day meeting at College Hall in Gower Street on Liminality, which ran from boy actors in Shakespeare through the coming of actresses at the Restoration, hermaphrodites by Carolyn Williams, and castrati by me and by Pat Rogers, who embodied liminality by 1) turning out not to be the female Pat many assumed and by 2) wearing blue eyeshadow in accord with the topic.

At this juncture I was suddenly offered a year's teaching at New York University, with a faculty apartment on Washington Square—first semester, undergraduate eighteenth-century novel and graduate eighteenth-century "intellectual prose"; second semester graduate eighteenth-century novel and freshman composition. My husband in England could manage his job, the house, and our two children, but not WSG and it collapsed. By that time we had members in nineteen countries.

Carolyn Williams and Lois Chaber will have to tell you how they picked up the pieces and reorganized WSG with a committee, seminar sessions three times a year, a workshop, and an outing, and, with the coming of the web, thanks to Louise Duckling and later Felicity Roberts, invaluable online facilities. When the changing financial policies of the University of London precluded our continuing at Senate House, Angela Escott found us receptive quarters at the Foundling Hospital. Our existence—and continuing existence, as you see—is sustained by improvisatory efforts of members without institutional support. We could therefore offer members a venue for day schools on new topics they would like to organize, with, as is the fashion, new edited collections to arise from the presentations given. We can offer support for activities yet unimagined that members may propose. We offer support and companionship for unaffiliated people like me.

I would say a word to scholars in women's studies of our period who are fortunate to have permanent university posts: please keep up your membership! We need you because it is you who know the men and women who complete PhDs and then cannot find permanent work—you can direct them to us, you can tell us who they are. We understand that you are very busy, that it isn't convenient for you to come to us on Saturdays, but it is important to us to be able to ask you for advice and information from time to time.