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Curating Women's Business: A Feminist Publishing Perspective

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Curating Women's Business: A Feminist Publishing Perspective

Abstract: This article takes the form of an interview with Polly Russell, the Lead Curator for Contemporary Politics and Public Life in the Manuscripts and Archives department at the British Library 2015–20, who is also British Library partner to the Business of Women's Words project, led by interviewer Margaretta Jolly. Russell discusses if and how archival practices capture radical business histories and how they could be developed to further connect and communicate them. This includes debates over enhancing collection records, privacy, law and reputation management, and links with professional and social movement networks. She points to the creative use of archival materials from Virago, Spare Rib and other feminist publishing businesses in a digital map, radio programmes, schools and professional training workshops, and a major public exhibition at The British Library. We conclude by considering the future of the radical business archive in an age of digital technology.

Keywords: feminist, business, archives, cataloguing, curation, engagement

Margaretta Jolly (MJ): Would you tell us about your role at the British Library, and where it touches the history of women in business or feminist business?

Polly Russell (PR): I became Lead Curator for the newly formed Contemporary Politics and Public Lives (CPPL), Archives and Manuscript

department at the British Library (BL) in 2015. The department, is part of the BL's Contemporary British section, and was tasked to build a new archive collection of 'contemporary politics and public life' of 'relevance to national life'. 'Contemporary' in this context refers to post-1950, subject to negotiation on occasion! The department consists of 2.5 curators and we work with paper and born digital archives. Our collecting area necessarily overlaps with other BL collecting departments like Oral History and spoken word recordings, as well as with our Events and Learning teams.

Expanding into contemporary political archives the BL entered a well-established and busy field, including the Churchill Archives at Cambridge, the Modern Records Office at Warwick and the feminist collections at the Women's Library at the London School of Economics, for instance. In joining this vibrant sector, the BL has sought to work collaboratively with other organizations and to determine, where possible, areas of expertise and specialism.

This has involved ongoing reflection of what is meant by 'contemporary politics and public life' and, indeed, what at any given time is 'relevant to national life'. In other words, who might be included in our frame? How do we decide what we do and don't collect? There are strategies we use to make these choices which I outline below but first it's useful to explain how, broadly, we understand the notion of 'contemporary politics and public life' post-1950.

The creation of the CPPL department provided the BL with an opportunity to map the material and cultural realities of UK politics in an age of mass media and social upheaval, and the shifting ideological terrain that determines what politics means. Before the Second World War, political identity was broadly conceived in terms of social class. But since the war, our conception of the political has been re-imagined to include race, gender, queer and environmental politics and a host of other social and political characteristics and preoccupations. Critical contestation of the political and public has resulted in new counter-cultural and political movements, whilst the collapse of the so-called post-war consensus, when mainstream politics generally agreed on the parameters of economic management and the welfare state, combined with a waning of established political structures, has brought forward new forms of politics. Such shifts have been paralleled in a transformation of the media landscape. A plethora of channels and platforms have disrupted older forms—newspapers, television and radio—forms that were centralized, institutionalized and somewhat respected. There has been a fundamental change in what constitutes 'public life', and the boundaries between the public and the private are increasingly blurred.

With this broad understanding of contemporary politics and public life as dynamic, and as involving both 'official' and 'unofficial' politics, CPPL attempts to build a collection that represents the diversity and complexity of contemporary political and public life, and we deploy a number of approaches to help determine our collection priorities.

First, we have identified four key areas: 'Parliamentary Politics & Politicians', 'Activists, Campaigns & Campaigners', 'Impactful Scientists' and 'Publishers, Editors & Journalists'. These are not exhaustive but provide a useful frame for our collecting resource. Beyond these areas, we aim to build upon existing manuscript archival collections. Where we already have a collection, we may seek similar or complementary archives. A good example is our Carmen Callil archives, which we secured after first acquiring the Virago collection. Looking forward we hope these two important archives, which have already generated significant research interest, will help us acquire additional archives relevant to the history of feminist publishing.

Second, we work closely with BL colleagues, in particular the Oral History Department. We recognize the enormous research value in having content across a range of formats and so, where appropriate, approach people whose oral history interviews are archived at the BL to ask about their personal archives. Two excellent examples include the feminist campaigner Una Kroll, who fought for the ordination of women priests, and the sociologist Ann Oakley, known for her work on sex and gender, housework, childbirth and feminist social science. Both were interviewed for *Sisterhood & After: The Women's Oral History Project* and their oral histories are archived in our Sound Archive. Subsequently, and in part as a result of this existing relationship with the BL, we were able to acquire their papers.

Third, we constantly assess what is meant by 'contemporary politics and public life' and their relevance to 'national life'. We aim to be reactive and proactive to reflect the shifting nature of the contemporary, so for example in light of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 we reviewed our collections and policies to assess our collections relating to Black life in Britain. Similarly, we were pleased to accept a donation from BBC Radio 4's 'The Covid Chronicles' of submissions from listeners about their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Finally, within our team we have research specialisms including science and scientists, food and food systems, feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement and broader social movements. Inevitably, the interests of curators and their research networks influence our archival acquisitions, although any material we acquire needs to fit within our agreed focus. A recent example of this was the acquisition of material from the

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campaigning organization Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food & Farming, which came about as a result of my contacts, and which fits into our focus on ‘Activists, Campaigns & Campaigners’.

Our commitment to collecting material and supporting research related to feminist history and feminist business archives reflects a number of factors. My involvement started with the 2010–14 Sisterhood & After (S&A) project, which established a national collection of oral histories here at the BL. These have attracted significant research interest, and are used as the basis for an archive, an online Learning resource, onsite school workshops and numerous events. In the last few years, feminist activism has been boosted by campaigns like ‘Me Too’ and ‘He for She’, by the centenary of the first women getting the vote in UK elections, and campaigns for commemorative statues, stamps and plaques. The S&A project, along with this current political moment, has demonstrated that BL audiences are keen to engage with feminist history, giving us a strong collecting rationale.

At the same time, colleagues in the literary archives and manuscript teams recognized the importance of the Virago story and were instrumental in acquiring the Virago and Callil archives—so central to the Business of Women’s Words (BOWW) project. The archives are large, contain multiple formats—manuscript, print, born digital—and do not neatly fit into a single descriptive category. They are rich in material relating directly to ‘business’ along with material of a more personal nature. This simple—indeed simplistic—description hints at the complexity of understanding feminist business and feminist archives as reflecting both individual endeavour and the social, economic and financial contexts in which they worked. This makes them complex and utterly fascinating.

MJ: You have overseen an expansion of the BL’s feminist holdings and programming. What were your motives? Did you encounter any obstacles? What helped you?

PR: First, the BL’s commitment to collecting and sharing feminist material is clear, as seen in the Women’s Liberation Movement learning workshops, online women’s history resources and, most recently, our largescale exhibition *Unfinished Business: The Fight for Women’s Rights*. I have never faced obstacles in developing this subject, save the inevitable resource limits and, as you would expect with a subject so vast, varied and sometimes contested, a healthy debate about content.

Remember as well, that the BL has an explicit remit to create, promote and build the national collection and support research. Within this, as I have explained, our scope is to collect materials reflecting contemporary

politics and public life which are 'of relevance' to UK national life. As you know, the last decade has seen a reinvigoration of feminist debate and scholarship. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted women, highlighting the structural inequalities women experience, particularly since many are in low-paid, precarious work or have extensive caring responsibilities.¹ So there is no doubt that feminism and its complex and dynamic history is 'of relevance' to the contemporary moment here, indeed globally. In this sense, the BL has a responsibility to collect materials which relate to this subject.

And speaking personally, I have long appreciated women's history and feminism as a lens to view the world. It is impossible to separate my academic curiosity from my political commitment to justice, diversity and inclusion and the changes they demand. Feminist history, as we know, is capacious and often painful, but also inspiring and energising. The tenacity, humour and courage of the generations of women and their allies who have challenged the status quo must be documented, analysed and shared to understand the past and influence the future.

MJ: I'm imagining that readers would love to hear about the BL's 'jewels' in feminist/women's publishing specifically.

PR: I would draw people's attention to two particular BL collection areas: the contemporary archives & manuscript collections and the oral history collections. Each holds treasures relevant to women's and feminist publishing, often with important overlap.

The Virago and Callil archives are terrific. Both contain materials relating to the business of publishing and to the history of Virago from an independent imprint in the 1970s to its incorporation under Little Brown in the 1990s. Both include more than 500 files: letters, notebooks, receipts, annual reports, meeting minutes, publicity posters and leaflets as well as individual files on authors like Maya Angelou and Mary Chamberlain. Other organizational archives at the British Library which may be of interest include the Society of Authors Archive (1876–1982) and the Macmillan Archive.²

Wonderful material relating to women and publishing can also be found in the archives of individual writers, ranging from correspondence with publishers, to contracts and financial records. BL examples include Angela Carter, Penelope Fitzgerald, Margaret Forster, Beryl Bainbridge, Phyllis Bottome and Eva Figs, the latter particularly in relation to Figs' editing of Macmillan's series on women writers.

Significant collections relating to women's and feminist publishing are also held by the BL's oral history collections, including Sisterhood & After,

1 For example, see: <https://www.wrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a1f51f03-fb60-4dab-b352-c2cb54bd0552>. Accessed 11 October 2020.

2 See the forthcoming BL collection guide.

of course, as well as the Women in Publishing project which captures memories of the campaigning group from its inception in 1979 to around 2000, its formative and most ground-breaking years. Interviewees include Jane Cholmeley and Jane Anger, both co-founders of the Silver Moon bookshop, and Liz Calder, founder director of Bloomsbury publishing. Besides BL catalogue records, the project has its own website exploring the history of the Women in Publishing initiative.

Also worth exploring is the Book Trade Lives oral history project, features 118 in-depth interviews covering the period from the 1920s to 2007, with recordings of women booksellers, agents, publishers and secretaries from companies like Bodley Head, Faber & Faber and Allen & Unwin. The project's interviewer Sue Bradley wrote a book based on this which provides an invaluable introduction to the collection.³

Finally, Authors' Lives is an ongoing project that contains interviews with Britain's leading poets and writers, together with technical and specialist writers, campaigners and literary journalists. Currently the collection includes around seventy recordings including Bernadine Evaristo, Jacqueline Wilson, Andrea Levy and Sarah Waters.

I'd also describe as a 'jewel' the BL's complete digitized run of *Spare Rib*. This provides an invaluable tool for analysing the rise and demise of the UK Women's Liberation Movement's best-known magazine. Accompanying this resource is a contextual website hosted by the BL including selected highlights from the magazine as well as essays, some of them written by former *Spare Rib* writers, editors and collective members. Sadly, as a result of the UK leaving the EU in January 2021, the basis of the copyright status of the digitized magazine, which relies heavily on EU orphan works directive, will come to an end. As a result the full run of digitized *Spare Rib* magazines will be withdrawn though the contextual site will remain.⁴

Outside the BL, I'd recommend the records of publishing houses held by the Archive of British Printing and Publishing at the University of Reading, which also holds additional records from the Macmillan Archive.

MJ: Wonderful stuff! A related question: do you consider that the business activities of, for example, an activist press, were seen at the time as secondary or even an afterthought?

PR: Apart from the excellent work of business historians, people have generally overlooked activist business activities. I think, this is partly to do with what you have written about so eloquently—that the activist critique of capitalism fosters an analytical blind spot about businesses and income-generation, and a focus instead on the products of such activity. Even with well-established publishing companies whose purpose is to make money, it is the editorial practices and outputs which get attention,

3 Bradley, Sue (2008), *The British Book Trade: An Oral History*, London: British Library.

4 For more information see: <https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2019/10/spare-rib-update.html>. Accessed 11 October 2020.

whilst the business of the business takes second place. Perhaps this is understandable because the business aspects of an organization is a bit like the engine in a car. It has to work but getting under the bonnet to examine the engine is less alluring than the journey. Yet of course, in the case of publishing, and in particular Virago as the BOWW research has unearthed, the business context and practices were at times instrumental in determining the editorial context and output and success of the company.

Angela Phillips has written a piece on the BL's *Spare Rib* website which considers the question also being addressed by BOWW, about whether and how a business can have feminist credentials while remaining financially viable. I can take no credit for this. In fact, back in 2015 I was mostly focused on the editorial content and aesthetics of *Spare Rib*, not its business side. It was the articles, the anarchic layout and wonderful photographs and illustrations which appealed. I hardly considered the logistics even though I was working closely with members of the *Spare Rib* collective on the *Spare Rib* digitization project and was therefore inevitably grappling with matters of management, ownership and copyright which are, of course, in part the story of business. The impetus to write about the actual business of *Spare Rib* came entirely from Phillips who insisted on putting this front and centre. This reveals, of course, my own curatorial focus and blind spots and how a background in the arts and literature can prioritize editorial over economic, content over process. Phillips' article and another about the day to day workings of *Spare Rib* on the same website opened my eyes to the exciting and essential job of thinking through the business of publishing as well as the outputs. It was why I have been so thrilled to work with the BOWW project.

MJ: Why does the library collect such materials? Who are the main users—and who might be the ideal users?

PR: I've described the BL's explicit remit to build, curate and preserve the UK's national collection of published, written and digital content. We are required to be 'comprehensive' and so our collections continually grow, each month, by nearly a kilometre of physical items, and nearly seven terabytes of digital content. BL collections comprise between 150 million and 200 million items, including books, journals, newspapers, patents, maps, prints, manuscripts, stamps, photographs, sound recordings, digital publications and over two billion pages of UK web content. Everything we do is underpinned by our responsibilities as custodians of this extraordinary resource, guaranteeing access to it for future generations.

Public engagement and research are at the core of our activities. Our Knowledge Centre is the focus for conferences, talks and workshops and we regularly hold events about women's history, politics and activism. The Learning Programme includes an expanding website of resources for teachers and students as well as onsite provision of workshops. These include WLM sessions as well as an online Women's History umbrella page including the S&A, *Spare Rib*, Suffrage, maps of the history of Women's Rights and Women's Liberation Movement activism and Unfinished Business resources. Our reading rooms receive 1.5 million visitors every year, and we are putting more content online. Our Sounds Portal includes thousands of music and oral history recordings which are free to access anywhere in the world and feature the voices and accounts of many significant women or of women's lives.

Contemporary Politics and Public Life (CPPL) at the BL acquires the archives of individuals, organizations and businesses that are significant to contemporary British culture. Together, the Contemporary Archives and Manuscripts departments at the BL aim to build a collection that will represent the diversity and complexity of contemporary political and public life in Britain and the rich and broad literary heritage.

More specifically the BL's collections relating to feminist publishing unveil a history which, without doubt, has transformed British society and politics. The mechanics of the businesses which fuelled so many of these debates and changes, and documented and recovered so much feminist history, cry out to be preserved and explored. They provide nuanced accounts of business history, which might inform, even transform, future business practice.

MJ: How does the BL manage the challenges of reputation management for people and bodies in the archive—important for anyone in today's mediated world, but perhaps especially so in the business context? Do you avoid collecting from a business still trading?

PR: Good working relationships are at the heart of all archives and their donors but with contemporary archives this is especially true. Often, and certainly with Virago and *Spare Rib*, many key people are still alive. Effort to acquire contemporary archives is always the start of a relationship, which is part of the joy of working with them. When archiving and making content available, we take into account donor requests about material they feel is sensitive and should be closed for a time. Indeed, we seek to work with donors and draw on their expertise during the cataloguing process and beyond. Of course, we are always keen to give access as soon as possible but this has to be balanced against personal and commercial

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sensitivities and the requirements of General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Where necessary we can close sections of archives for periods of time while making available significant quantities of material which we assess as low risk.

We do collect material from businesses which are ongoing concerns, agreeing with donors what might have commercial implications or sensitivities. Often we agree a cut-off date for when material can be accessed—twenty years for example, though this is subject to negotiation and discussion. Regular accruals of materials, donated by mutual agreement, are agreed on a yearly or two-yearly basis.

MJ: What should feminist or women's publishers today be thinking about if they want to be remembered? Digital business transactions and accountancy platforms are becoming ever more necessary to compete—yet without the colour or preservability of, for example, the receipts for restaurants or handwritten annotations by Virago editors in the early days. Or is it time to champion the right to be forgotten?

PR: The almost complete transfer from analogue to digital has significant implications for archives, archivists as well as archive creators and donors. There is a significant risk that while it is possible to store far more in a digital realm, it is also easy to destroy and lose digital content unwittingly. It is one thing to retain the right to be forgotten but quite another to be forgotten because of the precarious and changing nature of digital data management. At the most simple level I would advise anyone wanting to archive a business to pay close attention to two things: first, with hardcopy content, to identify material which does not exist elsewhere (letters, drafts of minutes, publicity leaflets etc.) and to file one copy in a safe, dry and pest-free location, ideally with some rudimentary ordering system; second, to establish from IT experts or, better, archivists familiar with born digital archiving, robust protocols for copying, preserving and storing digital files.

MJ: What an appropriately practical note to end with—thank you. By thinking about the right things, we can both honour privacy—including at the business level—whilst simultaneously ensuring that today's activist enterprises can protect their hard-won insights and experiences for tomorrow.

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