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The Women's Press silkscreening a poster for their first book, *Women Unite!*, 1972.

Feminist Publishing in Canada

MARGIE WOLFE

Dans cet article, l'auteur examine le rôle de la féministe anglophone dont on a publié les livres pendant les années 1970. Elle donne un aperçu des restrictions importantes et des menaces à sa vie, afin d'orienter son avenir et de consolider son existence et ses forces.



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The aim of this article is to examine the role of anglo-Canadian feminist publishing during the 1970s. The reasons for writing it are strategically motivated, although a desire to credit the overworked, underpaid and often undersupported women who produce our feminist newspapers, periodicals and books certainly played a part. In the main my objective is to identify how feminist publishing has been effective, outline its major limitations, and realistically present the threats to its existence in order to help those of us involved to rationally direct its future and help secure its life, growth and potency in the 1980s.

During the last decade, as the Women's Movement grew, feminist publishing ventures sprang up throughout the country. What they produced depended on the resources, concerns and perspectives of the women involved. The character of the ventures was also in part determined by both the perceived needs of the movement and the communities in which they evolved. Occasionally, when the needs and resources were misinterpreted, the ventures failed. A good example is the now-defunct *Other Woman*. Although Toronto would seem the ideal location for a newspaper, the fact that it has so many women's groups only a telephone call away may have worked against the information-sharing function of a newspaper. Women possibly felt their energies would be better directed elsewhere, especially considering the numerous opportunities for involvement in a city the size of Toronto. Although other factors affected the demise of *The Other Wo-*

man—financial problems, particularly—one should look at Thunder Bay's *North-ern Woman Journal* for comparison. This newspaper, which continues to publish and maintains a primarily local perspective, is probably the only link among feminists in the isolated regions of Northern Ontario. The women who produce it find it extremely worthwhile and would be hard put to find equally satisfying alternatives for involvement in their particular geographic location.

Other publishing ventures suffered the fate of *The Other Woman*, for varying reasons, but many survived. Those that did and even those that didn't, tried—and generally served the movement well. During the 1970s feminist book publishers—Women's Press and later Press Gang and Eden Press—began releasing a broad spectrum of material which for the first time comprehensively and consistently articulated the concerns, struggles, history and contributions of women in general, and Canadian women in particular. While Eden Press directed itself primarily to the academic field of women's studies, the other two produced a wide range of books, and together with Kids Can Press and Before We Are Six actively developed and promoted feminist and non-sexist Canadian children's publications for the first time.

The feminist periodicals and newspapers which came out in the 1970s served the movement equally well. *Room of One's Own* provided a forum for the development of women's literature and poetry while *Branching Out*, an imaginative general interest culture magazine gave

us a feminist alternative to *Chatelaine*. The theoretically rigorous yet accessible *Atlantis* presented a broad spectrum of material related to women, and top-quality national newspapers, *Kinesis* and *Upstream* reported on current issues and on the struggles of women both in Canada and elsewhere. *The Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women* comprehensively presented the work being done in all areas of women's studies, while *The Optimist* and *Prairie Woman* articulated the special concerns of women in more isolated regions for their sisters in other parts of the country.

Together these publishing ventures and others like them, plus the newsletters produced by various groups and committees, fulfilled a valuable function for the Women's Movement during the 1970s.

Movement publishing helped to increase the confidence of new writers and artists by presenting their work. As an information network it kept women aware of their sisters' struggles, thereby helping to increase solidarity and maintain momentum. Although the movement itself raised the questions, feminist publishers provided the material to better articulate and deal with them. Together the effect was nurturing and uniting. Certainly the movement would have survived without its publishing industry but it would have been less well informed, more geographically inbred and less able to define its own literature, theory and history.

Aside from its functions for the already converted, feminist publishing played an important role in enlarging the movement, gaining support for it and furthering its goals within the larger society. Although the primary readership of feminist publications is not the general public, in the 1970s these publications acted as a major resource for the established media whose audience is a significant number of the Canadian population. As the movement became more and more widespread, mainstream periodicals, newspapers and broadcast media were forced to deal with it. Having had no experience with the questions and concerns the movement was raising they were forced to turn to the women themselves and particularly to their publications for not only information but for writers. Hence we saw feminists like Bonnie Kreps, Myrna Kostash, Katherine Govier, Penny Kome and Joanne Kates, many of whom had previously contributed to movement publications, now developing similar material for *Macleans*, *Chatelaine*, the *Globe and Mail* and *Homemaker's*, to name only a few. We also saw the *Toronto*

Star, along with other dailies, use the Women's Press book, *Rape: The Price of Coercive Sexuality* as their primary resource for articles on this issue. We found that when both public and private television stations were developing programs on early childhood education they turned to the authors of *Good Day Care* for guidance.

These are only a few examples among many, but they indicate the important resource role feminist publishing has had in transmitting our concerns outside the movement. By being a major source of information and writers for the established media, feminist publishing expanded its audience considerably and very probably gained members as well as support for the movement from persons whose previous conception of it revolved around some vague notion of women concerned with burning their bras.

Feminist publishing had an even more direct effect in other areas. The decade saw students at colleges and universities across the country, not only in women's studies but in sociology, history, labour studies, all the social science programs, being taught from books produced by feminist publishers. It saw instructors at those same institutions turn to *Atlantis* and the *Canadian Newsletter of Research on Women* for additional sources of material. Ministries and boards of education began to recommend Canadian feminist publications as resource material and buy bulk quantities for distribution in their schools. We also found library systems purchasing our feminist publications and their journals recommending our children's books. Both libraries and book stores set up special women's sections. We've won awards, many of the authors we've published have been acclaimed—in short, the material we've produced has been accepted as being important.

Despite the vital role feminist publishing has played in the 1970s, it has had its limitations. Some we can do something about, others maybe not. Although in recent years more union women have become involved in the Women's Movement (Organized Working Women for one, produces a newspaper called the *Union Woman*), in the main the Women's Movement and particularly feminist publishing have not reached working-class women. Of course, groups publishing feminist material are concerned about the situation. Both Women's Press and Press Gang, for instance, have been struggling with the problem for years. Even the readership of mainstream women's publications does not include great numbers of work-



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ing-class women. *Chatelaine* and *City Woman* gear themselves to the middle-class housewife or career woman and *Home-maker's*, which has a controlled circulation, is only distributed in middle and upper income neighbourhoods.

The predicament is a very real one. On the one hand, the most exploited women are working class, and those who are also immigrants are even more so, yet these are the very women who are not among our ranks. The problem may be explained in terms of their socialization, lifestyles and our inability to make our publications available to them. For women who are working-class yet English-speaking, their socialization has generally not made reading a priority. Even more to the point, working-class women, whether they want to or not, often don't have the time to read. They are the greatest bearers of the double day. To make the situation worse, if working-class women want to read and do somehow find the time, the places they look for reading material often don't carry feminist literature. Marketing studies show most of these women buy their books and periodicals in supermarkets or convenience stores and at best Coles—none of which as a rule sell feminist publications. Consequently they buy *The National Enquirer*, Harlequin romances or low-quality pulp fiction, which are available at these outlets.

The situation for immigrant working-class women who don't read English is even more problematic. Perhaps the ethnic papers and periodicals are reporting on women's issues and concerns. But the questions of whether they are and if they

are, whether these women are reading them, are beyond the scope of this article. Certainly their predicament and that of English-speaking working-class women should be priorities for the Women's Movement in general and for feminist publishing in particular.

The need for feminist publishing is as great now as it ever was. Granted, mainstream book publishers have released some excellent material by and for women. The same is true of a number of periodicals and newspapers. However, the major concern of commercial book publishers is profits. With the Canadian book industry in greater financial trouble now than it has been in the last decade, we've been warned that commercially-directed publishing will be intensified. For us this means that if book publishers think a feminist book will sell, they'll publish it. Otherwise, forget it. And try selling them a first-time author. On the other hand, do we really want an unconcerned editor at McClelland and Stewart shaping the issues for the Women's Movement?

As far as relying on left presses to publish material for us, well, 'women' are an issue on the left, but they are not the only concern and certainly not the primary one. In any case, being on the left doesn't necessarily mean that one's position on women is feminist.

Dependence on mainstream periodicals and newspapers as an alternative to producing them on our own is similarly precarious. First, we again have no control over what's written. Secondly, even if a mainstream periodical or newspaper is

Quand je serai morte mes soeurs . . .

FRANCE THÉORET

Quand je serai morte mes soeurs, dites-vous que j'étais une femme ordinaire qui a détourné au jour le jour le cours de sa vie. Patiemment, je me serai appliquée même temps que les meilleurs analystes parce que profondément racines, elles sont aussi perclues des peurs d'arrêter de tourner en rond et de boucler la boucle. La sage, la douce, la peureuse déboucle et vous invite avec la seule humanité que je possède à garder vos trésors anciens de la critique radicale qui se fait toujours dans le plus grand secret sinon à rompre le cercle du moins à n'empêcher aucune qui veut le faire.

à n'être pas fidèle au père en moi. C'est la seule infidélité que je réclame.-Au père en moi, au vrai père et à tous les pères.- Je suivais depuis ma naissance le cours de la voix qui tourne en rond et détruit. C'est la seule véritable emprise que je me suis appliquée à défaire, celle d'une masochiste qui ne peut venir à bout de vivre. Ayez pitié mes soeurs de vous d'abord si vous n'arrivez pas à être au présent, investies dans la force de vivre et de combattre pour vous. Les femmes comme je les vois ne sont ni hors de l'histoire, ni blanches de toutes les lourdeurs d'exister. Elles se sont retransmis un secret de génération qui est de tourner en rond.

Quand je serai morte mes soeurs, dites-vous que les seules vraies ententes que j'aie jamais vécues étaient avec vous que tout ce que j'aurai écrit vous est entièrement dédié et que je n'ai de merci pour aucun père.

Quand je serai morte mes soeurs, vous dire ce que je crois était le meilleur en moi, un goût insatiable pour la connaissance au prix même de vérités négatives sur moi, sur nous. Nous sommes historiques mes soeurs et quoique l'on fasse nous garderons pour les générations à venir le poids de ce que nous aurons fait et de ce que nous n'aurons pas fait.

Cette révolution, je me la pratique, je me la questionne, je ne me la vis plus pour l'avenir, je me vois mortelle, pure excroissance qui voudra dire ses traces et souhaiterait seulement ne jamais tuer autour.

publishing a feminist writer now, there is no guarantee she will be allowed to continue. In fact, in Toronto this past year one feminist journalist had her women's column axed.

Moreover, mainstream newspapers and periodicals generally only print what they consider 'newsy' or what will sell their product. Last year, when the first book on day care in Canada was released, Canadian Press Wire Service was approached to do a story. The editor's response was that the issue was 'old hat.' When trying to get media coverage for International Women's Day 1979 in Toronto, several journalists weren't interested because they thought the Women's Movement was dead. In addition, personal prejudices or controversy will often affect an editor's decision about running a story. When, for example, was the last time a quality article on sexuality or lesbianism was printed in a mainstream newspaper or periodical? Finally, in the 1970s it was feminist publications that fed the material to the established media. If we don't continue to act as a resource for them and let them know the nature of our concerns, who will?

Though it is clear we must continue publishing in the 1980s it looks as if it's going to be more difficult. Even now it's not easy. Feminists who are publishing books, periodicals and newspapers are working long hours, for minimal or even no pay. In the 1980s dedication and commitment are not, it seems, going to be enough. We'll have to become more business-minded if we are to survive.

In the early years of the last decade there was a large amount of public and institutional funding to be had. Many feminist publishers began and sustained themselves on grants. These days are over: 'women' are no longer a priority. Numerous women's groups have folded because they have lost their financial support. We can of course continue to fight cutbacks but at the same time we must prepare for the worst. This means learning to sell more of what we produce, expanding our market, generally reaching all those women we want to attract anyway.

How to accomplish this is another matter. Definite considerations should include identifying exactly who we want our readership to be, writing about what concerns them in a style they find accessible, presenting the material in a form to which they can respond and then locating and getting the publications into the outlets where this defined audience will see them. The next step is identifying effective methods of publicizing and promoting the material so that the reader-

ship will go out and look for it or at least recognize it when they see it.

Unfortunately, increased marketing, distribution and promotion efforts mean more work for everyone involved in feminist publishing. There are monopolies and prejudices with which to contend. Learning the specific 'how-tos' of marketing is an education in itself. But, if somehow feminist publishers can, not only will our existence become more secure, but we'll be reaching a greater audience, thereby strengthening and entrenching the movement of which we are a part.

Once these business considerations are taken into account, the possibilities for feminist publishing in the 1980s seem very exciting. Aside from all the developing literary and artistic efforts, there are a multitude of identified women's concerns yet to be articulated in print. With a new generation of women reaching adulthood and with the possibility of more older, adolescent, union and working-class women becoming involved, the body of material that will need to be published is mind-boggling. While the 1970s often saw only the initial grappings with subject matter, we can look forward to seeing these questions approached in new and even critically-opposed releases.

In fact, the Eighties will likely see debates prevalent throughout feminist publishing. It's certainly been some time since we've all been just 'women's libbers.' There are now so many differing feminist viewpoints, with equally varying political perspectives and priorities, that debate is unavoidable. The obvious forum for this debate is feminist publications.

Despite these speculations, whatever role feminist publishing takes in the future it's important that its functions be rationally and strategically defined with the needs and conditions of the movement and the society as a whole the guiding factors. There is no point in publishing for its own sake but that is what will result if we use the realities of ten years past to identify our priorities for the 1980s. To remain productive those of us involved in feminist publishing should define our objectives after examining the current social forces and then rationally direct our efforts to make those objectives a reality. We've played an effective role in the past, with a decade of experience surely we now can do our work even better.

I would like to thank Frieda Forman, Sherrill Cheda, Susan Bazilli and Carol Zavitz for their assistance in the preparation of this article.