

FEMINISMS: HISTORIES, IDEAS & PRACTICE

WHS Annual Conference


Glasgow Women's Library - Friday 9 September 2016: 9.00am-5.00pm



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Conference Programme

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FEMINISMS: HISTORIES, IDEAS AND PRACTICE

9.00-9.30

REGISTRATION

9.30-10.00

Women's History Scotland – An Introduction: Alison McCall (WHS Convenor)

10.00-11.30

PANEL 1: Activism – Chair: Valerie Wright

Tanya Cheadle, University of Glasgow – *Bella Pearce / 'Lily Bell': Glasgow Feminist, Socialist and Christian Sexual Mystic*

Bella Pearce (1859-1929) was a prominent Glasgow feminist and socialist, who as 'Lily Bell' wrote the first women's column in a labour newspaper, 'Matrons and Maidens' in Keir Hardie's *Labour Leader*. Convinced that the Independent Labour Party's vision of a 'new life' could be attained only with the reconfiguration of intimate relations, she used her journalism to challenge conventional sexual morality, advocating both birth control and sex education. By the 1900s however, she had become thoroughly disillusioned, writing that the ILP had 'proven itself to be first a foremost a man's party'. She instead switched her allegiance to the Women's Social and Political Union, stating it was 'exactly the kind of party – a woman's party – that I advocated long ago'. Throughout her political life, Pearce was also a devout member of an esoteric American Christian organisation, known as the Brotherhood of the New Life. It preached a radical message of sexual mysticism, asserting that by denying sexuality, Christianity had become sterile. She therefore constitutes a fascinating exception to the majority of feminist women in this period, who, whilst highly critical of marriage, nonetheless saw any suggestion of unconventional sexuality as an excuse for male sexual licence, or a threat to the political efficacy of their movements.

Jane Rendall, University of York – *'The principle of mutual support': female friendly societies in Scotland c. 1789-1830*

In 1811 a group of women in Galston in Ayrshire agreed to adopt 'the principle of Mutual Support, as the ground of association' and to found the Galston Female Society. From the late 1790s onwards middle-class women in Scotland formed their own associations for philanthropic and religious purposes. But very little attention has been paid to a form of association in which both working-class and middle-class women were active: the female friendly society. I have identified sixty-six female friendly societies founded in Scotland before 1830. Friendly societies gave working

people an element of security through mutual insurance against sickness, and opportunities for regular sociability. Female friendly societies differed from male ones in that they tended not to be based on an occupational, national or religious identity but on the local community, sometimes even on a local street. They might be established entirely by working-class women, especially in areas of growing proto-industrial employment where male societies were also strong; but in up to half of these societies there was also some element of philanthropic patronage by middle-class women. Female friendly societies offered to working women mutual support in the face of sickness, and to both middle- and working-class women new experiences in formal collective organisation.

Sarah Browne, Heritage Project Co-ordinator, Scottish Women's Aid – 'Pledging our support to the seven demands of the Women's Liberation Movement': Feminism and the emergence of Women's Aid in the 1970s and 1980s

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) which emerged in the late 1960s in communities throughout the United Kingdom has often been described by some commentators as ending in the late 1970s. However, as recent research has shown, this was not the case. Instead the WLM and the feminist ideas formed within this movement continued into the 1980s and beyond. One way this happened was through the setting up of organisations like Women's Aid (WA) which carried on aspects of the work of the WLM. This paper will focus on the emergence of WA in Scotland and its link to the WLM, considering the importance of feminist history, ideas and practice to its formation. It will demonstrate that at times the link between WA, Women's Liberation and feminism could be contested by some women involved in the WA movement who felt that by associating with the ideas and practices of women's liberation, WA could potentially alienate some women including those living in rural areas or from working class communities. By analysing these discussions, this paper will reveal some of the attitudes about feminism and feminists in the late 1970s and the 1980s and it will argue that we can gain a better understanding of how feminism developed from the late 1970s onwards by looking at organisations like Women's Aid.

11.30-12.00

COFFEE

12.00-13.00

PANEL 2: Material/ Visual Culture – Chair: Andrea Thomson

Georgia Mackay, University of Glasgow – *The End of High Heels? Doc Martens and Feminism in the late 20th Century*

The female fascination with shoes is a subject that has been increasingly well-studied over the last couple of decades, however much of this work focuses on high heels, high fashion or fetishistic aspects of shoe wearing and ownership. Whilst feminism has been discussed within these boundaries before, far less attention has been paid to feminism and footwear in the terms of anti-fashion and subculture. Women in subculture are notoriously understudied, and as such this paper seeks to try and address that balance by taking an in-depth look at the wearing of a particular brand of shoe (Doc

Martens) during a particular time period (1980-2000) through the eyes of some of the women who wore them. By taking information from several in-depth interviews, this paper will look to explore the link between feminism and Doc Martens by asking questions of style, subculture and self-definition.

Nel Whiting, University of Dundee – *A 'voyeuristic fiction of candour'? Feminist Methodology and Portraiture*

Using portraits as both aesthetic objects *and* in terms of their social content liberates them from discussions as to whether they are great art or not and allows them to be seen as part of a discursive network that produced and reproduced the cultural ideas. Portraits are thus a deposit of, and a vehicle or active agent in promoting, values in a given society. This paper will focus on a feminist methodology to utilising portraits as primary sources in the writing of history.

'Gender' lies at the heart of the feminist academic project. Judith Butler argued it is "instituted ... through a *stylized repetition of [habitual] acts*". That is, gender is performative and enacted through on-going gender-coded conduct; what one wears, how one appears, the social space one occupies, and the way one is portrayed in a painting. This focus on repetition offers possibilities to consider the gendered display of protagonists within portraiture and the repetition of gendered pictorial conventions across the works of eighteenth-century Scottish artists. That is, the exploration of the homogeneity of pictorial idiom can, as this paper will show, give insight into broader gendered norms.

13.00-13.45

LUNCH

13.45-15.30

PANEL 3: Biographies – Chair: Esther Breitenbach

Sian Reynolds, Jane Rendall, Elizabeth Ewan, Rose Pipes: Progress Report – *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2nd edition (2018)

Sarah Edwards, University of Strathclyde – *Dr Meads and her wartime flock: the history and representation of Bishop Otter College at Bromley, 1942-45*

Dorothy M. Meads was the Principal of Bishop Otter Teacher Training College for women (the present-day University of Chichester) from 1936-47. Meads' work in teacher training has been evaluated in histories of these institutions since the 1980s, by women's historians and educational researchers. Much of this work has focussed on the college's evacuation to Bromley from 1942-45, when the Chichester site was occupied by the RAF for D-Day planning. These accounts of Meads' wartime leadership focus largely on the dangerous conditions, and her ill-health, neglecting her policies and practices during these years, and the development of her longer-term educational vision for a women's college, which had a significant impact on its future.

This paper has two linked aims: first, I will briefly outline this neglected history of Bishop Otter College, and its social and cultural importance for our knowledge of women's education and experiences during the Second World War, by drawing on little-studied reports, college magazines and Meads' extensive correspondence with Bishop George Bell and the Air and Education ministries. I will conclude by reflecting on the reasons for the marginalisation of this history, at Chichester and within women's and feminist histories, considering the popular narratives and representations of the Second World War within which Meads is contained.

Kenneth Baxter, University of Dundee – *'That Mrs Alderton happens to be a Liberal is immaterial': Women, feminism and electoral politics in interwar Scotland*

After women gained the right to vote in parliamentary elections, many Scots politicians seemed to view the new female electorate as a distinct and homogeneous group. At the same time, many former suffrage campaigners and feminists hoped (while anti-suffragists feared) that women would work together in politics to advance the issues that mattered to them. While many women became heavily involved in political parties from 1918, the interwar period would quickly prove the error of assuming women in party politics would act as a bloc. Many high profile female politicians explicitly denied they were feminists, and party loyalty and political ideology soon proved to divide women just as much as men.

This was well demonstrated in 1922, when Catherine Buchanan Alderton stood as an Asquithite Liberal in Edinburgh South. The Edinburgh Women Citizens Association endorsed her candidacy, but quickly was condemned by women who supported the Unionist Party, for asking its members to be a 'political Judas'. Indeed, despite Edinburgh South having a majority of female electors, Buchanan Alderton was heavily defeated in two-cornered fight. Looking at this and other examples this paper will consider the extent to which party identity shaped women's activism in electoral politics in interwar Scotland.

Dr Susan Batchelor, University of Glasgow – *Pearl Jephcott and a Time of One's Own*

Pearl Jephcott's (1967) *Time of One's Own* is a classic study of youth leisure which captured the social and leisure habits of 15-19 year-olds in Scotland at a unique point in social – and sociological – history. The study is remarkable for its prescient analysis of 'ordinary' or 'typical' youth and its ambitious and eclectic research design. This paper offers an introduction to Jephcott's study, highlighting the most significant features of her scholarship – particularly her commitment to privileging the voices and experiences of ordinary young people and her willingness to experiment with novel ways of documenting everyday life. By locating Jephcott's research practice within the context of postwar British sociology, the paper demonstrates how Jephcott was a product of her time, preceding yet presaging developments in feminist sociology: scrutinizing everyday domestic routines, privileging women's voices, challenging mainstream approaches to collecting and presenting data, and attending to the connections between power and the production of knowledge.

15.30-16.20

SUE INNES MEMORIAL LECTURE

Introduction: Sian Reynolds

Zoë Fairbairns, *Five Decades, Five Feminisms*

Zoë Fairbairns first encountered the words 'women's', 'liberation' and 'movement' side by side in the same phrase in 1969. She was in the USA at the time, but couldn't wait to hurry back to St Andrews University (from which she was taking a year out) and set up something similar.

By the time she got back, feminism had already arrived. Together with fellow-student Sue Innes, and others, Zoë became a founder-member of the St Andrews University Women's Liberation group.

Zoë is a novelist, short story writer, journalist and playwright. Her books include *Benefits*, *Closing and Other Names*. She co-authored the pamphlet *Saying What We Want: Women's Demands in the Feminist Seventies and Now*.

She is a member of the Women's Equality Party and the Fawcett Society, and is a Friend of the Feminist Library. She also meets regularly with a group of other women who were active as feminists in the 1970s and who want to continue raising their consciousness. She teaches creative writing at the City Lit in London, where she lives. Her website is at www.zoefairbairns.co.uk

16.30-17.00

Annual General Meeting – WHS Steering Committee

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