

## CHAPTER 7

# Women into print: Feminist presses in Australia

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‘The freedom of the press belongs to those who control the press’ was one of the enduring slogans of the second-wave women’s movement. Reflecting the belief that the printed word could incite social change, feminists asserted their position in the public sphere of publishing, as authors, in print production and through the establishment of feminist presses. Reclaiming and celebrating women’s writing was a defining characteristic of second-wave feminism, and feminist literary and cultural historians took up the literature of Australian women writers from the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The Australian second-wave women’s movement emphasised cultural forms; it was a catalyst for feminist writing, in the form of journalism, autobiography, short fiction, novels, poetry and plays, as well as feminist history, political theory, gender and sexuality studies. These texts, in turn, form a body of cultural memory that informs how feminism marks its own past, providing a narrative for individual and collective remembering.<sup>2</sup>

While there has been attention to the impact of second-wave feminism on Australian literature and the literary form, as well as the contested terrain of what is meant by feminist writing, there has been less attention to the significance of feminist engagement with the material production

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1 Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers, 1925–1945* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981); Susan Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women’s Writing* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995); Dale Spender, ed., *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women’s Writing* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1988).

2 Margaret Henderson, *Marking Feminist Times* (Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

of print. As Kathryn Flannery argues, many of the historical accounts of second-wave feminism emphasise women interacting with each other, sharing experiences through discussion, rather than women engaged in the production of 'writing, reading, creating artwork or illustrating copy, running printing presses, or distributing print materials'.<sup>3</sup> During the 1970s in Australia, feminists produced newsletters, newspapers, magazines, posters, pamphlets, flyers and postcards to disseminate political ideas, promote activism, advertise cultural events and act as a medium for personal connections. They also established presses, providing independent printing facilities for the women's liberation movement, left-wing and community groups, and direct mail-order distribution for feminist literature and feminist book publishing.

Print, and particularly the printed form of the book, has been understood in the West as a knowledge-making practice. This principle was adopted by second-wave feminists in Western countries such as Australia where the majority of political ideas were disseminated through publications. Stacey Young argues that feminist presses exemplify a theory of power and an approach to activism in which discursive struggle is central.<sup>4</sup> She suggests that feminist publishing, as well as feminist writing and other discursive aspects of activism, 'represent the most direct attempts by the women's movement to change fundamentally the way people think'.<sup>5</sup> The printed word was central to the women's liberation movement. From the 1970s onwards, published women's writing grew exponentially, inspired by second-wave feminist theory and activism and fostered by access to higher education. New feminist writing explored areas of women's lived experience with attention to sexuality, family and new forms of community.

The twenty-first century has seen a dramatic shift to a digital age, profoundly changing the materiality of all forms of publishing. At the same time, it has prompted an archival turn in feminist attention, concerned with the documentary and cultural products of feminist activism.<sup>6</sup> This chapter is concerned with the role of feminist presses established in the 1970s in Australia. Feminist print and publishing cultures of this period

3 Kathryn Flannery, *Feminist Literacies, 1968–75* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 2.

4 Stacey Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 26.

5 *Ibid.*, 3.

6 Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

were characteristically both personal and political activities. It is valuable to examine feminist interventions into printing and publishing, the materialist processes of feminist print production, as a way of interpreting the archive of published work of the time. As Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr argue: ‘Feminist print culture is an essential context for understanding literary artifacts that arose from second-wave feminism’.<sup>7</sup>

## Feminism as writing

Key texts are identified as making and defining the women’s liberation movement. Indeed, some have characterised it as a ‘writers’ movement’.<sup>8</sup> ‘This book is an action’, claimed Robin Morgan in the first line of the radical feminist anthology of writing by women *Sisterhood is Powerful*, indicating a belief that writing is a form of activism. Published in 1970, this anthology of over 50 contributors from the women’s liberation movement included many who had never published previously. Feminist texts were seen to connect the movement together, transnationally, through the activities of writing and reading. Recent attention to the importance of writing and reading to the second-wave women’s movement, particularly in the United States, has highlighted the way it served to link ‘art and activism’ and has produced a distinctive ‘feminist canon’:

Early feminists wrote in a wide variety of genres—poetry, manifestos, plays and performances, personal and scholarly essays, science fiction and detective novels, avant-garde experimental texts, and coming-of-age novels—and they purposefully explored a range of alternative aesthetics. What united them was a firm belief that books could be revolutionary, that language could remake the world, and that writing mattered in a profound way.<sup>9</sup>

Reading, as Harker and Farr argue, ‘was essential in early conceptions of second-wave feminism, as books became a provocation to conversation about readers’ own lives and experiences’.<sup>10</sup> In Australia, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Anne Summers’s *Damned Whores and God’s*

7 Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr, eds, *This Book is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 7.

8 Diane Brown, ‘Feminist Publishing: 1970 – 2006’, in *Making Books: Contemporary Australian publishing*, ed. David Carter and Anne Galligan (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 268–78, 269.

9 Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 1.

10 *Ibid.*, 4.

*Police* (1975), Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda* (1976), *The Other Half*, edited by Jan Mercer (1975), as well as the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley were required reading for second-wave feminists. Fiction was also seen as a way of 'transforming readers' politics'.<sup>11</sup> Writers such as Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Marge Piercy and Rita Mae Brown used fiction as a way of exploring new forms of feminist subjectivity. In Australia, short fiction, semi-autobiographical writings and poetry were key forms, leading to the publication of books such as *Mother I'm Rooted*, an anthology of poetry edited by Kate Jennings (1975), Elizabeth Riley's *All That False Instruction: A Novel of Lesbian Love* (1975), Glen Tomasetti's *Thoroughly Decent People* (1976) and Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977). For many who first encountered feminist ideas at the time, experiences of reading these books are etched in memory as key moments, often a vehicle for 'consciousness-raising' and providing frameworks and vocabularies for new politicised understanding and knowledge.

Some feminists embraced opportunities to explore their writing and publishing skills as journalists, photographers, cartoonists and graphic designers in left-wing and progressive print media newspapers and magazines, such as the Communist Party of Australia's *Tribune* (1939–91), *Nation Review* (1970–81), *The National Times* (1971–86), Friends of the Earth's magazine *Chain Reaction Magazine* (1975– ), as well as the emerging alternative and community radio media at 2JJ (1975– ), 3CR (1976– ), 3RRR (1976– ) and 2SER (1979– ). Feminists were also contributors to political, academic and literary journals, such as *Meanjin* (1940– ) and *Arena* (1963– ), as well as student newspapers such as *Honi Soit* (University of Sydney). However, women who took up feminist themes in their writing for alternative and left-wing publications often experienced sexism and condescending attitudes and had difficulty getting their work published because feminist's issues were not seen as central to the political struggle.

In higher education, student activism led to the introduction of women's studies in Australian universities, notably following a strike by staff, students and unions in the Department of Philosophy at Sydney University in 1973; as well as at Flinders University and The Australian

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

National University.<sup>12</sup> The new cohort of enthusiastic students created a demand for feminist academic texts. Feminist academics working in these disciplines began to write theoretical articles and books to reflect their areas of research and support their teaching.

## Feminism as print production

It was not only as writers that feminists engaged with print culture. Second-wave feminism was actually a print media movement.<sup>13</sup> According to Kathryn Adams, ‘between March, 1968, and August, 1973, over 560 new publications produced by feminists appeared in the United States, each one serving as a mailing address for the movement’.<sup>14</sup> There were also over 200 feminist bookstores across the United States.<sup>15</sup> As Jaime Harker and Cecilia Farr point out:

These presses operated on a shoestring budget, dependent on donated labor and often marked by inexperienced printing and editing, but they produced some of the most remarkable artifacts of Women’s Liberation and launched many writers and texts that have become essential to Women’s Liberation and to the U.S. women’s literary tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, this was not the first time feminists had employed print media to disseminate radical political ideas. First-wave feminists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain also entered the public sphere by creating a feminist press to organise and mobilise for suffrage and other campaigns, as a vehicle for debate and to influence public opinion.<sup>17</sup> In Australia also, in 1888, Louisa Lawson established a printery and published the radical women’s paper *The Dawn*. She employed all-women staff to produce and print the paper, leading to a boycott by the printers’ union.<sup>18</sup>

12 See contributions to *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1988), edited by Alison Bashford.

13 Barbara Grier, Publisher, Naiad Press, quoted in Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d*, 25.

14 Kathryn Adams, ‘Paper Lesbians: Alternative Publishing and the Politics of Lesbian Representation in the United States, 1950–1990’ (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1994), 193, cited in Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 6.

15 Junko Onosaka, quoted in Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 6.

16 Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 6.

17 Maria DiCenzo, Leila Ryan and Lucy Delap, *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

18 Louise Poland, ‘Setting the Agenda: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics in Australia, 1974–2003’ (PhD thesis, Monash University, 2007), 78.

However, by the second wave of the women's movement, in Britain, United States, Australia and other Western countries, feminists had begun to understand language and popular media as instruments for subordination of women. This led women to establish an alternative feminist press, by creating magazines and newspapers that allowed them to disseminate and control the circulation of feminist political ideas. Feminist periodicals were widely divergent, ranging from small-scale newsletters to mass market magazines. In the United Kingdom, *Spare Rib* (1972–93) was an iconic magazine that was instrumental in shaping feminist debates. Founded with a manifesto that set out to correct misunderstandings about women's liberation, challenge stereotyping and exploitation of women and 'reach out to all women, cutting across material, economic and class barriers',<sup>19</sup> it sought to provide an antidote to existing women's magazines that treated women as 'passive, dependent, conformist, incapable of critical thought'. *Spare Rib* soon moved to a non-hierarchical structure with an editorial collective; it sold around 20,000 copies per month.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, *Ms* magazine (1972–89) was established as a commercial mass media publication that became a central vehicle for disseminating popular feminist ideas to a wide readership. Co-founded by Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes, it acquired a circulation up to 500,000 and an estimated readership of 3 million.<sup>21</sup>

In an account of the cultural production of the second-wave women's movement in Australia, Margaret Henderson claims that in terms of genre, 'journalism marks the 1970s, while the novel is central to the 1980s'.<sup>22</sup> This is reflected in the proliferation of feminist periodicals that emerged during the 1970s. During this time, many women became involved in the production of magazines, newsletters, newspapers and pamphlets through feminism. Feminist magazines including *Shrew* (Brisbane, 1971), *MeJane* (Sydney, 1971), *Mabel* (Sydney, 1975), *Hecate* (Brisbane, 1975), *Sibyl* (Perth, 1974), *Refractory Girl* (Sydney, 1972), *Vashti's Voice* (Melbourne, 1973), *Apron Strings* (Darwin, 1973), *Scarlet Woman* (Sydney and Melbourne, 1975), *Womanspeak* (1975), *Bluestocking* (1975), the Women's Electoral Lobby's newsletters, the *Anarcho Surrealist*

19 'Facsimile of Spare Rib manifesto', 1972, Facsimile format, held by British Library as part of Spare Rib collection items: [www.bl.uk/spare-rib/collection-items](http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/collection-items).

20 *Spare Rib*, British Library, [www.bl.uk/spare-rib](http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib).

21 Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1.

22 Henderson, *Marking Feminist Times*, 25.

*Insurrectionary Feminists* journal (Melbourne, 1973) and *Koore Bina* 'A Black Australian News Monthly' (1976) all began during this time and were essential for dissemination of radical ideas, political analysis and debates that were otherwise not available in the public domain.<sup>23</sup>

These publications were vehicles for feminist ideas, as well as news about political and social events, fundraising and meetings. Reflecting on the first issue of *MeJane*, Suzanne Bellamy describes it as:

a new territory of language and definitions. There is a mix of news (abortion fight updates with vivid disclosures and information, anti-war issues, conference reports, group meeting times), book reviews (Greer), a focus on child care, working women, women in gaol, and redefining housework as work.<sup>24</sup>

Contribution to the print production of these magazines involved women taking on roles as writers, editors, proofreaders, designers, illustrators, cartoonists and photographers. As Laurel Forster argues:

'the experience of production' was highly valued as a feminist activity. If print was the means of spreading the word, then engagement with the publishing industry or print cultures demonstrated participation in the cause of women's liberation.<sup>25</sup>

However, unlike the United States, where the Women in Print movement emerged with women who already worked in the publishing industry, in Australia, most women did not have previous experience, particularly in print production. You learnt on the job:

Looking back on the production process now is more significant than we thought it at the time. What really now can be considered early print technology was what we had to use: Letrasett, graph paper, scissors, typed galleys and the long thread of silver tape streaming out of the varitype machine all over the floor as Gale worked through the nights typing up columns and teaching us how to do it too.<sup>26</sup>

23 Mary Spongberg, 'Australian Women's History in Australian Feminist Periodical 1971–1988', *History Australia* 5, no. 3 (2008): 73.1, 73.2.

24 Suzanne Bellamy, 'Newspaper: MeJane', in *Things That Liberate: An Australian Feminist Wunderkammer*, ed. Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson, 105–12, (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 107.

25 Laurel Forster, 'Spreading the Word: Feminist Print Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review* 25, no. 5 (2016): 813.

26 Bellamy 'Newspaper', 106.

The first *Melbourne Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1972–84) (MWLN) was published by a collective and printed on a Gestetner printing machine. While relatively easy to operate without printing skills, it was labour-intensive and often unreliable. Nevertheless, use of the Gestetner allowed full control over content and all aspects of production. Later, during the 1980s, photocopiers became an alternative, but not necessarily more reliable, printing option. As the editorial of the MWLN in August 1983 comically put it:

Because when you're freezing your proverbial off at 3 o'clock in the morning doing battle with the recalcitrant photocopier because the gestetner broke down for the fourth time and paper is too damp to put through the machine and you've tried drying it in front of the one-bar radiator for hours and now it's dry but the edges are curled and the other gestetner machine eats it but doesn't digest it and so the drum revolts and regurgitates gross insults against the professionalism of women's libbers, and so does the Maintenance Man ...<sup>27</sup>

*Mabel: Australian Feminist Newspaper* was published about four times per year from Sydney. The second issue explained that:

... an important aspect of the paper is that it is anonymous—we do not sign contributions. MABEL is not a vehicle for stars but a collective attempt to communicate some of the ways feminists see the past, present and future—we have no paid workers.<sup>28</sup>

The rationale for establishing *Mabel* was directly linked to the political crisis of 1975, when the progressive Whitlam Labor Government was dismissed by the Attorney-General:

*Mabel* was born two weeks before the December 13 [1975] election. She was going to be a broadsheet from an ad hoc collective of Sydney women in the Women's Movement giving our views on the political crisis and its effects on women. The response of ideas and article and money is so great that in only eight days she blossomed into a 24 page newspaper 30,000 copies of which were distributed prior to the elections.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Cited in Jean Taylor, 'Gestetner', in *Things That Liberate: An Australian Feminist Wunderkammer*, ed. Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2013), 93.

28 Cited in Paula Byrne, 'Mabelled', *Hecate* 22, no. 2 (1996): 87–100, 88.

29 *Mabel* 2 (March 1976), cited in Byrne, 'Mabelled', 89.

*Hecate* was founded in 1975, International Women's Year, in Brisbane by Carole Ferrier, as an 'interdisciplinary journal of women's liberation'. The journal's editorial policy was made clear in the first issue: 'As feminists and socialists, we view this journal as a means of providing a forum for discussing, at a fairly theoretical level, issues relating to the liberation of women'.<sup>30</sup>

Mary Spongberg points to the contribution of feminist periodicals, particularly those identified as vehicles for the emerging field of women's studies, to Australian feminist historiography. She argues that *Refractory Girl*, one of the longest standing Australian feminist periodicals, produced a 'distinctly Australian feminist historiography, to overtly insert women into the narratives that had framed Australian history, and to alter the parameters of Australian history in order to make women's experience central'.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, *Hecate*, based in Brisbane, 'situated itself within a socialist-feminist tradition' that was more concerned with class oppression under capitalism. It published labour history, focused on:

women workers' resistance to capitalist oppression in the past; treated domestic and voluntary labour as labour; and put the spotlight on highly marginalised groups of women workers such as Aboriginal women and domestic servants. Many of these articles signalled the importance of thinking about race in relation to women's experience of work and capitalist oppression.<sup>32</sup>

These magazines were clearly distinguished from commercial and mass media, the majority run voluntarily by individual women who formed collectives, with editorial meetings, writing and production of galley proofs and artwork often occurring in their homes. This reflected commitment to the principle of the personal as political through alternative, non-patriarchal and anti-capitalist ways of working. In this way, it was a separatist activity, involving women working autonomously with control over the materialist processes of print production. However, the act of publishing itself is action in the public sphere and also required engagement with the male-dominated commercial publishing and printing industries.

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30 *Hecate* 1 (1975).

31 Spongberg, *Australian Women's History*, 73.3.

32 *Ibid.*, 73.10.

Some feminists, particularly lesbians and sexuality activists, encountered antagonism and censorship from commercial printers when they attempted to get posters, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers printed. This was an obstacle to the dissemination of radical ideas and images and the organisation of political activism. In April 1974, Maxwell General Printing refused to print an issue of *Refractory Girl* dedicated to lesbian content ‘alleging it was offensive because of the reprinting of a poem by Penny Short that it deemed “filthy”’. Several other printers also declined to do the job after Maxwell’s refusal.<sup>33</sup>

Feminist, lesbian and gay fictional writers also experienced difficulty getting their work published with mainstream book publishers. While commercial publishing houses recognised the market for conventional women’s fictional writing, they were, at least initially, often unprepared to take on new authors or innovative writing that departed from traditional representations of women, as well as writing that challenged established genres.<sup>34</sup>

## Feminist presses

In the United States, feminist, lesbian and gay publishers proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s. The Women in Print movement drew together women working in the publishing industry, both mainstream and independent. Its first conference, held in 1976 in Nebraska, was attended by 200 feminist presses, publishers and booksellers. This ‘feminist revolution in literacy’<sup>35</sup> provided the context for the publication and wide distribution of key works, as well as sparking the interest of mainstream publishers in feminist literature. However, debates around feminist publishing engagement in the commercial arena, particularly *Ms* magazine, were vehement.

33 Sue Wills, ‘Seventies Chronology, Part II, 1973–1979’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 23, no. 55 (2007): 136.

34 Michael Hurley, ‘Gay and Lesbian Writing and Publishing in Australia, 1961–2001’, *Australian Literary Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010): 42–70.

35 Onosaka, quoted in Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 6.

In the United Kingdom, a different culture emerged, largely focused around the success of Virago (1973) and The Women's Press (1978).<sup>36</sup> Virago aimed to be the first mass-market publisher of books for women. Founder Carmen Callil believed that establishing a successful commercial publishing house was an essential aspect of feminist activism. It published an extensive list of fiction and nonfiction, as well as a reprint series, branded with the publisher's logo and distinctive green book spines. Virago attracted 'a loyal readership and boasted some big-name authors, arguably generating greater publicity and profile than an enterprise of its size and scope could expect'.<sup>37</sup> All books published included the statement that Virago was a feminist publishing company together with a quote by Shiela Rowbotham from *Women, Resistance and Revolution*. There were a number of other, smaller feminist presses that emerged in the UK from the 1970s. Simone Murray argues that while these smaller presses were often more politically radical, all were:

united in their perception that the act of publishing is, because of its role in determining the parameters of public debate, an inherently political act and that women, recognising this fact, must intervene in the processes of literary production to ensure that women's voices are made audible.<sup>38</sup>

In Australia, feminist interest in controlling the means of publication and taking on skills traditionally identified as masculine, such as printing, gave rise to a small number of feminist printing and publishing ventures. During the 1970s to 1980s, over a dozen feminist presses were established in Australia.<sup>39</sup> These presses did not position themselves clearly within the commercial arena. They were much fewer in number than in the United Kingdom or United States, operated on a smaller-scale financially and often embraced alternative forms, with a strong emphasis on non-hierarchical, collective structures, skill sharing and consensus decision-making. Most importantly, however, members and workers saw their involvement as feminist activism. As Louise Poland explains:

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36 Virago was established by Carmen Callil, Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe in 1973, all of whom had been involved in the establishment of *Spare Rib* magazine. The Women's Press was established in 1977 by Stephanie Dowrick and entrepreneur Naim Attallah.

37 Catherine Riley, "'The Message is in the Book': What Virago's Sale in 1995 Means for Feminist Publishing', *Women: A Cultural Review* 25, no. 3 (2014): 235.

38 Simone Murray, *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (London: Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), 2.

39 Louise Poland, 'The Devil and the Angel? Australian's Feminist Presses and the Multinational Agenda', *Hecate* 29, no. 2 (2003): 123.

Australia's feminist presses were politically- or culturally-led rather than market-driven. Some provided the means for feminist and other left-wing publications to be produced without censorship, some sought to shape and reflect the political concerns of the Australian women's liberation movement, while others aimed to encourage women writers and present experimental and potentially transformative women's fiction to their readership.<sup>40</sup>

Australian feminist presses of this time attempted to negotiate the conflicted terrain between participation in the commercial—that is, in the parlance of the time, capitalist—patriarchal publishing industry and their commitment to progressive, radical feminist politics. These were 'ideological struggles about economic and political purity',<sup>41</sup> where survival was always tenuous. Each of the presses attempted to navigate this precarious terrain differently, sharing the key principle that women own and control the means of production. The presses were neither always separatist, nor necessarily always demonstrably in support of each other, and they interacted with, and reacted against, the mainstream publishing industry in different ways.<sup>42</sup> However, they all attempted to put into practice feminist principles in the belief that control over the production of print was a form of political power. As Diane Brown and Susan Hawthorne argue, 'feminism at work in publishing is a different kind of engagement with texts and the politics of cultural production, where the agency of feminism exposes and contests power relations through the development of risky publishing lists'.<sup>43</sup>

In Melbourne, concern about sexism in children's literature led a group of women from the Box Hill Women's Liberation Branch in May 1974 to form a book group called the Women's Movement Children's Literature Cooperative Ltd, with shares of \$1.00 each sold to a wide group of women in the Melbourne women's movement. Later changing its name to Sugar & Snails Press, the cooperative began by packaging children's books for publication by other small publishers. Later, Sugar & Snails began its own publishing program, producing illustrated children's books. During the 1980s, the press produced a number of schoolbook series in cooperation

40 Poland, *The Devil and the Angel*, 123.

41 Jennifer Gilley, 'Feminist Publishing/Publishing Feminism: Experimentation in Second-Wave Book Publishing' in Harker and Farr, *This Book is an Action*, 24.

42 Forster, 'Spreading the Word', 814.

43 Diane Brown and Susan Hawthorne, 'Case-study: Feminist Publishing', in *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia*, ed. Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006), 263.

with an educational publisher. Between 1974 and 1991, Sugar & Snails Press produced over 50 book and non-book items that contributed to the emergence of non-sexist children's literature in Australia and assisted in launching the careers of a number of now well-known authors, illustrators, editors and publishers.<sup>44</sup>

Two presses were established during this time to provide access to alternative feminist-run printing services. In Sydney, Everywoman Press was set up in 1976 by a collective of four women to provide printing facilities for the women's liberation movement and left-wing and community groups. Each contributed \$1,000 to buy a printing press and other equipment,<sup>45</sup> and three members of the collective completed technical courses in offset printing and platemaking.<sup>46</sup> One of the founding members, Kath McLean, recalled that:

We set it up in the belief that women could and should control their own printing—part of the feminist belief in knowledge and information being power, and printing being a major communications medium for knowledge and information, hence power ... We were highly motivated by our ideology. We also believed that 'women can do anything!'<sup>47</sup>

Everywoman Press printed feminist publications, including *Scarlet Woman* and *Refractory Girl*, posters and other resources for feminist organisations including the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre and the Sydney Rape Crisis Collective, as well as occasionally taking on jobs considered 'commercial' such as for the University of Sydney. They offered 'good prices to political groups, especially women's groups', and maintained low profit margins, with minimal capacity to pay their workers. 'As a result of exhaustion, the press was sold in 1980 and the partnership was dissolved, but not before the full-time press workers passed on their skills to other women in the movement.'<sup>48</sup>

In Melbourne, Sybylla Co-operative Press (later Sybylla Feminist Press) was established in 1976 by eight women, all of whom were active in the women's movement. It was intended to provide access to printing facilities, without risk of obstruction or censorship, to support the growth

44 Sugar & Snails Papers in the University of Melbourne Archives.

45 Poland, 'Setting the Agenda', 93.

46 Ibid., 96.

47 Email to Louise Poland, 5 September 2000, reproduced in Poland, 'Setting the Agenda', 96.

48 Poland, 'Setting the Agenda', 96–97.

in periodicals, flyers, posters and cards created for women's movement activities. The decision to set up the press was a response to the broad political climate at the time, sparked by the 1975 dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. This event sent a cold shiver through feminist and left-wing political communities and there was concern about the potential backlash against progressive and radical politics.

The collective purchased a second-hand printing press with donated funds—a single-colour Multilith 1250 WLD. It had a printing policy that established that it would not print the work of projects that were sexist, racist or anti-working class. It also specified that:

No commercial advertising of commodities. Restaurants accepted.  
No real estate agents. No church groups with some exceptions.  
Brotherhood of St Laurence and left wing groups. No Spartacists.  
Anarchists accepted. La Trobe Maoists out.<sup>49</sup>

Eventually operating out of a shopfront in Collingwood, Sybylla provided commercial printing services, pre-press layout and bromides, collating, stapling and guillotining to a wide range of political, community and educational organisations in the women's movement and on the Left generally.

Sybylla was established as a workers' cooperative but operated on collective decision-making principles. While initially run entirely on voluntary labour, by the early 1980s it had secured seed financial assistance under the Victorian Co-operative Development Program to establish a financially viable cooperative business. By 1985, it employed six full-time workers who performed the roles of printers, publishing editor, graphic designer, shopfront staff and administrator, all of whom were paid wage parity at printing industry award levels. There was a commitment to the integration of manual and intellectual labour, skill sharing and training. Sybylla contributed to the creation of a network of feminist writers, editors, designers, illustrators, cartoonists and bookshops in Melbourne.

During this time, Sybylla began a small publishing program with a commitment to publishing innovative, radical and alternative literature by women that reflected personal and political lives, including fiction and nonfiction.<sup>50</sup> In 1982, Sybylla published its first title, *Frictions*:

49 Sybylla Press Archive: Margaret McCormack, p. 18, cited in Poland, 'Setting the Agenda', 99.

50 I was a collective member and paid worker at Sybylla Feminist Press between 1985 and 1991.

*An Anthology of Fiction by Women*, edited by Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson. It was one of the first anthologies of fictional writing by women published in Australia. The published collection, launched at the Women and Labour Conference in 1982, included contributions from 23 writers, many of whom went on to become established authors. Over the subsequent years, 10 books of fiction and nonfiction were published by the press.

Louise Poland claims that the 'story of Sybylla Press, the longest surviving feminist press in Australia, is an extraordinary one of feminist activism, dedication and commitment, and of five collectives of women over 26 years'.<sup>51</sup> It put into practice a belief that providing an independent feminist alternative to the male-dominated mainstream commercial printing and publishing industries was a form of activism where power was vested in control over the published word. As Poland argues, feminist presses were 'as interested in how the books were produced as they were in the output. Arguably, a refusal to separate the publishing process from the output is central to most feminist publishing'.<sup>52</sup> There are a number of ways that feminist presses demonstrated this discursive activism, including what they published, the relationship established between the publisher and the authors, and how the press operated and was organised. Being committed to encouraging previously unpublished writers and new forms of writing that challenged conventional genres was key to their identity.

At Sybylla Press, there was a clear commitment to new and emerging authors and to close and supportive relationships with authors in the editing and production of books. The press's subsequent title, *A Gap in the Records* by Jan McKemmish, was a groundbreaking feminist spy thriller that subverted the genre in form and content. *Working Hot*, by Kathleen Mary Fallon, was an experimental novel of lesbian love written in prose, verse and libretto.<sup>53</sup> It won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for new writing in 1989 and continues to be read in tertiary Australian literary studies. None of these books would have been taken up by mainstream publishers at the time. Each of them involved lengthy and painstaking collaboration between the author and the publisher in relation to editing, design and print production.

51 Poland, 'Setting the Agenda', 97.

52 Poland, 'The Devil and the Angel', 125.

53 For an account of the importance of this book, see Fiona McGregor, 'The Hot Desk: *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon' *Sydney Review of Books* (25 February 2019), [sydneyreviewofbooks.com/the-hot-desk-working-hot-by-mary-fallon/](http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/the-hot-desk-working-hot-by-mary-fallon/).

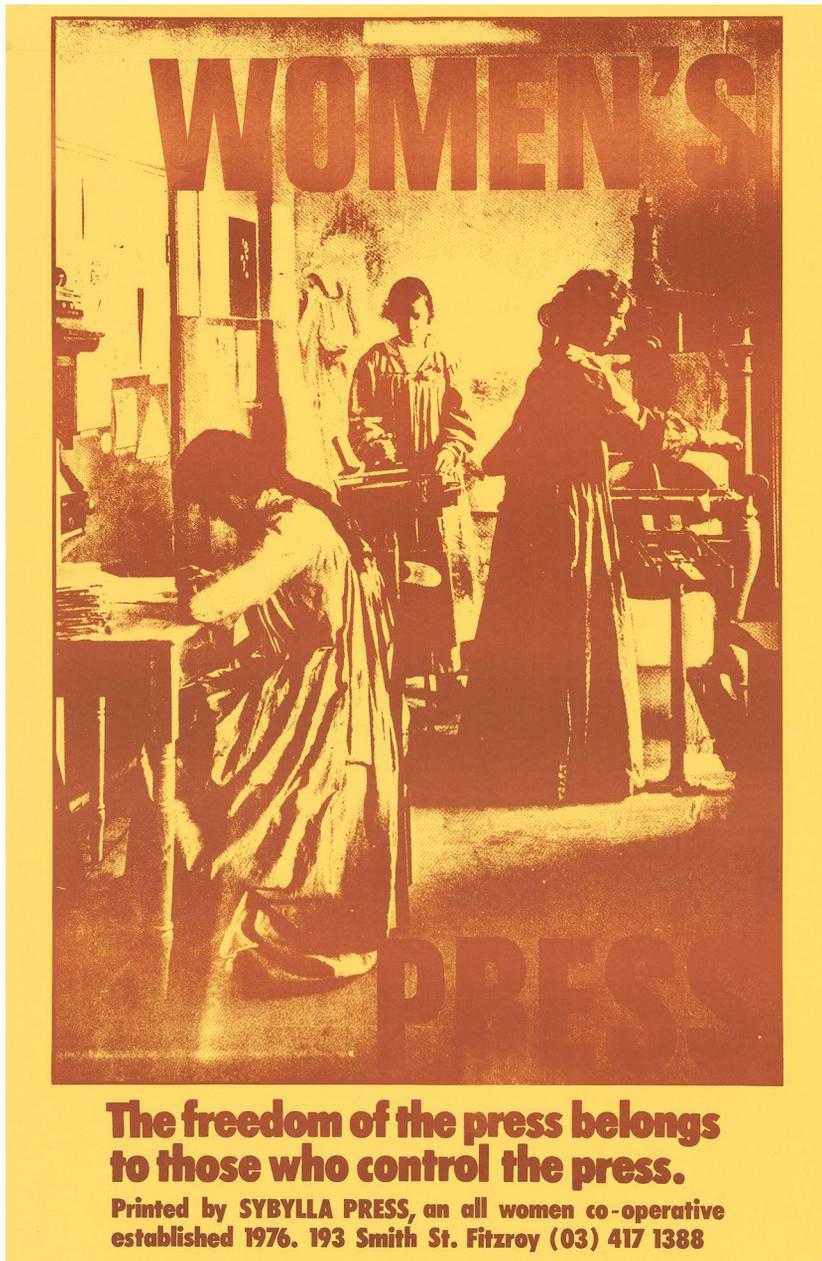


Figure 7.1: 'Women's Press', A3 poster, printed and published by Sybylla Press, Fitzroy, Victoria [between 1976 and 1979].

Source: Held by State Library of Victoria, Riley and Ephemera Collection, posters. Reproduced with kind permission of Spinifex Press.

In 1979, Sisters Publishing was established in Melbourne by five women publishers, including Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble, each of whom was a director and shareholder. The group was set up in recognition of the belief that serious women writers were largely overlooked by mainstream publishers. They had an innovative response to the perennial distribution problem facing small publishers in Australia, by setting up as a mail-order book club providing both their own and other publishers' books, including Virago and Women's Press, to subscribers at a discount, through a newsletter. 'Its bookclub was instrumental in influencing the reading tastes of a generation of Australian feminists.'<sup>54</sup> They operated as a business, with the aim of becoming solvent, producing books on a low budget. Sisters published writing by women across all genres, but focused on forms that were not well represented in mainstream publishing: poetry, short stories, literary fiction and radical ideas.<sup>55</sup> The company launched the careers of a number of significant women writers, as well as distributing to readers in metropolitan, outer suburban and remote areas of Australia.

In Sydney, Women's Redress Press was established in 1983, financially floated by offering shares of \$100 to over 200 women. Redress was a nonprofit publisher run by women to publish and promote progressive and first-time women writers. It also provided access for women to acquire experience in editing and book production. Initially it was a feminist book-packaging cooperative that provided constructive feedback and training in editing and publishing skills to women whose manuscripts had been rejected by mainstream publishers. However, it had difficulty finding publishers that were willing to purchase packaged books. Wild & Woolley, owned by Pat Woolley, one of the contributors to Redress Press, sponsored its first four titles. Within a couple of years, it had become a publisher run by volunteer staff and went on to publish a diverse list of approximately 20 books. One of its first books was Faith Bandler's *Welou, My Brother* and over the next decade it went on to publish a diverse list of fiction and nonfiction, including a number of anthologies that included first-time authors. Other feminist publishers followed. In Adelaide, Tantrum Press was established in 1987, with a focus on readings and publishing local authors and locally written and produced women's plays.<sup>56</sup> Spinifex Press was established in Melbourne in 1991, and Artemis Publishing in 1992.

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54 Poland, 'The Devil and the Angel', 124.

55 Sisters Archive, S0005, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

56 Poland, 'The Devil and the Angel', 124.

By the mid-1980s, second-wave feminist politics and feminist presses were having a discernible impact on mainstream book publishing. Feminism had a transformative effect on the field of Australian book publishing and played an important role in producing the conditions for the growth in women's writing. Mainstream publishers, including large commercial, independent and university presses, had recognised the commercial viability of feminist writing, including the significant growth of women's studies texts. Many established imprints, employed feminist editors and took on the republication of key out-of-print texts. It appeared to some that the rationale for independent feminist presses no longer existed. Combined with commercial challenges and depleted energy, this led the majority of the presses, including Sybylla and Redress, to winding up. However, Spinifex Press continues. It has published over 200 titles, fiction and nonfiction, in print and ebook form, that the publishers maintain would not be published by mainstream presses.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the second-wave women's movement in Australia can be characterised as a print media movement. Feminist engagement with the material production of print was based on the belief that dissemination of feminist ideas through publishing was a vehicle for social change. Recognition of the value of reading and writing as feminist activities led feminist activists into direct engagement with print production through the publication of magazines, newspapers, newsletters and pamphlets. It also led to the establishment of alternative, independently owned presses and publishing houses. These engagements by feminists in print and publishing ventures have resulted in a valuable archive of published work and unpublished records that reveal some of the personal and political imperatives, priorities, conflicts and achievements of women into print.

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