Introduction

The UK publishing house Virago, founded in 1973 and running today as an imprint of Little, Brown publishers, is perhaps the most famous – and certainly the longest-running – of the women-only presses that sprung up as the second-wave feminist movement began. These publishing ventures, including but not limited to The Women's Press, Pandora, Sheba and Onlywomen, were critical to the early formulations and activities of second-wave feminism. Virago and its contemporaries enabled both the dissemination of feminist intellectual discourse and the discovery of women's cultural and literary history through publication of women's writing from the past. Of all these second-wave feminist publishers, Virago alone survives, making the publisher a useful prism through which to examine evolving feminisms and the changes in women's writing and in wider culture since the 1970s. Its story is unique and vital.

The importance of Virago's example lies both in its status as a female-run venture and in its provision of women's fiction and non-fiction writing. Virago, and its founder Carmen Callil in particular, regarded the act of publishing *as itself* a moment of feminist praxis – an enactment of feminist politics through the incursion into 'male' areas of economic and cultural authority. Callil has always been explicit in arguing that such practical acts are as critical to feminism as the exploration of theory and the dissemination of positive images of women that was also part of Virago's remit. Virago's feminism can therefore be defined in terms of both praxis and theory – deeds as well as words. Accordingly, this book is split into four parts roughly defined by the span of ten years, each of which is divided in two: separate chapters look in turn at the practical aspects of the work of the press, followed by an exploration of its literary output. It will, I hope, play its part in addressing the lack of writing on the phenomenon of women's publishing. In her 2004 text *Mixed Media,* Simone Murray identifies this gap in literary material which chronicles and/or quantifies feminist publishing history (Murray 2004). Crucially, she also begins the task of describing the effects of feminist publishing (see the section entitled 'Situating Feminist Publishing Analysis' later on in this chapter).

In the pages that follow, I rely on, and am grateful for, the words of Virago's key women themselves, gathered during interviews in which they expand on the commentary written of their press by others, reflect on the

cultural context into which Virago was launched, and give their opinions of Virago's continued relevance for women, feminist or otherwise. Founder Carmen Callil, co-founder Marsha Rowe, founder-publisher Ursula Owen, former managing and editorial directors Harriet Spicer and Alexandra Pringle, current Chair Lennie Goodings and authors Ali Smith and Sarah Waters all provided their own analyses of the feminist publishing phenomenon and Virago's role in directing feminist politicking and polemic.

Context and Framing

Virago is a UK publisher, and so the focus of this book is the UK feminist and publishing scene from the second wave to the contemporary. However, while it prioritizes discussion of UK feminist politics and UK authors, it of course recognizes and examines the overlap and interplay between, especially, UK and US feminism and publishing, as well as literary and cultural trends from around the English-speaking world.

This analysis of Virago situates it as emerging from within the second-wave feminist movement, while recognizing that recent critiques of this wave metaphor has problematized its usefulness as a framing tool: 'we've reached the end of the wave terminology's usefulness. What was at first a handy-dandy way to refer to feminism's history, present, and future potential with a single metaphor has become shorthand that invites intellectual laziness, an escape hatch from the hard work of distinguishing between core beliefs and a cultural moment' (Jervis in Berger 2006, 14). While acknowledging such critiques (including others by Clare Hemmings (2011) and Sam McBean (2015)), which argue that the 'progress narrative' inherent in this analogy impedes our understanding of feminism's nonlinear development, this text nonetheless utilizes the terms first-, second-, third- and fourth-wave feminism. These 'wave' terms provide a useful framework or shorthand to more easily signpost both temporal and theoretical positions – further, I would argue that the wave analogy is appropriate because it is in fact suggestive of flux and circularity rather than linearity, each 'new' wave both a turning back on and a renewal of that which came before.

Situating Feminist Publishing Analysis

Prior to Murray's 2004 text *Mixed Media,* there were some examinations made of the emergence of women-run presses and their effects. Holding the power to publish was structured as vital to feminism's success, an idea set out

neatly by Carmen Callil herself in discussion of her reasons for setting Virago up: 'in the past very few women had the power to publish. That is the point, of course: the power to publish is indeed a wonderful thing' (Callil 1980, 1001). Charlotte Bunch echoed this idea in an early second-wave analysis of women's publication traditions: 'controlling our words corresponds to controlling our bodies, our selves, our work, our lives' (Bunch 1982, 140).

As the 1970s progressed, the growing numbers of feminist presses in the UK had tangible effects on the wider book industry and arguably on culture itself – as I will examine in the first part that follows. Marsha Rowe recalls the electrifying effect of her first experience of creating published content with a group of other interested women: 'about 30 women came and it was just the most extraordinary evening, in my basement flat where I was living then . . . I mean there was one woman there, or one or two women, who were able to write articles, but everyone just supported: production roles, advertising. Very few women had any power in shaping what was produced or content or anything to do with women'.[1] Yet in industry comment, women's contributions were ignored or deliberately overlooked. John Sutherland's 1978 overview of book publishing makes not a single mention of feminist publishers, a full five years after Virago was launched and at a time when many other women's presses were beginning to make waves (Sutherland 1978).

It is this reality that provoked writers such as Dale Spender to address the situation of women in the industry. Her early examination of feminism's relationship to publishing concluded that men had created a protective system of 'gatekeeping' to exclude women from the business of books – as writers, as publishers and even as readers. 'Women who reveal their intellectual resources are often described as having "masculine minds", which is a clever device for acknowledging their contribution while at the same time it allows it to be dismissed, for a woman with a "masculine mind" is unrepresentative of her sex, and the realm of the intellectual is still retained by men' (Spender 1982, 19). Spender endorsed new feminist presses such as Virago that were directly challenging this hegemony.

Spender's sister Lynne similarly developed a theory of literary 'gatekeeping' to explain the ways in which women's writing had historically been overlooked for publication (Spender 1983). Arguing that the literary industry had always been controlled by a privileged male elite, she concludes: 'gatekeeping thus provides men with a mechanism to promote their own needs and interests at the expense of all others. In doing so, it effectively ensures the continuation of a male-supremacist culture' (Spender 1983, 6). Women's writing, remaining unpublished, is consigned to obscurity, and thus women are kept outside of the literary and intellectual arenas. Spender posits feminist publishers as vital to the reinvestment of women's writing as valuable:

'the role of feminist publishers is to break down traditional figurings of women's writing – and of women themselves – through the dissemination of literature that has historically been edged out (Spender 1983, 13).

This challenge to the orthodoxy of the traditional English canon led to more archaeological work, digging out women's publishing heritage (see Chapter 2) and theorizing its importance. Historicizing women's involvement in publishing led feminist investigators Cadman et al. to the records of the Stationer's Company in the 1600s. These show there were at least sixty women printers in Britain at that time (Cadman et al. 1981). Over the following centuries, women remained involved in small-scale publishing businesses, working from or near their homes as typesetters, proofreaders and publicists – suitably genteel work for women. As their educational opportunities improved in the nineteenth century, their newly acquired literacy, coupled with new printing technology that saw the industry suddenly expand as books became quicker and cheaper to produce, provided women with greater opportunities to enter the publishing world. During the early years of the twentieth century, publishing was regarded as a profession suitable for a woman of a certain social standing (Coser at al. 1982).

The feminist publishers of the second wave were perhaps also inspired by literary forebears such as Virginia Woolf, who had articulated the need for women to empower themselves through publishing in the wake of the first wave of feminism. As Bunch was later to reassert, Woolf argued that the power to publish necessarily lay in the hands of those who owned the presses, so seizing that power was critical: 'to enjoy freedom, if the platitude is pardonable, we have of course to control ourselves. We must not squander our powers' (Woolf 1932, 258). Simone Murray chronicles the attempt by first-wave suffragists to seek this control by setting up publishing houses in numbers before the outbreak of the First World War, citing evidence of at least eleven pro-suffrage presses in addition to the Woman's Press operating in London (Murray 1988, 199). These Edwardian feminist presses – which included among their number Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press – can well be figured as forerunners of Virago and the rest of the second-wave feminist publishers that were established in the UK in the 1970s.

Ken Worpole observed in his 1984 overview of contemporary publishing that 'such has been the success of feminist publishing in recreating a popular feminist literary tradition as well as encouraging an extraordinary body of new writing that even the traditional mass distributors have had to take note' (Worpole 1984, 41). As the second-wave feminist publishing phenomenon took hold, there was a critical assessment of its impact and effect from within the feminist literary community. Gail Chester and Sigrid Neilsen published their radical feminist perspective of women's publishing,

In Other Words, exploring the principles and payoffs of smaller-scale feminist presses (Chester and Neilsen 1987). Their style of publishing was very different from Virago's, focusing on collectivism and more radical feminist treatises. Independent feminist presses such as Sheba and Onlywomen (who were never incorporated as part of a larger mainstream house as Virago, Pandora and The Women's Press were) defined themselves outside of capitalist business principles, measuring their success in terms of the absolute freedom they had to choose what to publish and the consequent symbolic meanings this had for women generally. 'It was the price we paid for having total control over the whole publishing process – something which as women we rarely have, and as writers, almost never. It was worth it' (Chester and Neilsen 1987, 106).

Following this, Dale Spender revisited her earlier assessment of feminist publishing to evaluate the impact of second-wave publishers after more than fifteen years of operations (Spender 1989). In *The Writing or the Sex?,* Spender argues that Virago, in blazing the trail followed by the other presses, helped women achieve authority in publishing in a way that hadn't been attained in any other cultural arena. It is, she said, 'one – if not the only – area where women have been able to set up an *alternative,* autonomous, and viable industry, and this has numerous implications for publishing and for the power configurations of the sexes' (Spender 1989, 47). This was made even more remarkable because 'publishing is (still) a markedly influential medium and one where it is [now] possible for women to go to women' (Spender 1989, 49).

In the same year, Nicci Gerrard's assessment of the second-wave publishing phenomenon concluded similarly that 'those women's presses which have sprung up over the last two decades have not only introduced women's writing to readers who were hungry for it, and provided space for writers from different backgrounds and cultures, they have also formed a pressure group upon the mainstream houses' (Gerrard 1989, 9). But she is sceptical of mainstream engagement with women's writing, believing it evidences a cynical move for profit and a usurpation of the bestselling authors nurtured by the feminist presses rather than a genuine shift in the way in which women writers and readers are figured in culture.

Certainly, it took the intervention of feminist publishers to prove the profitability and popularity of women's writing – only for mainstream presses to encroach upon women's newly won territory. Rukhsana Ahmad explained through the pages of *Spare Rib* magazine that 'though many progressive women writers do get picked up by the mainstream – once they have established a readership – and that success may be useful to the women's movement, this only happens for some. The likelihood for example of les-

bian writers succeeding in mainstream houses seems remote' (Ahmad 1991, 12). Patricia Duncker's examination of the feminist publishing phenomenon echoes this view. She is fearful of the consequences of women's presses being edged out by mainstream houses: 'if they go out of business, feminist innovation, ambition and radical politics will surely go too. We are not in the majority; and I fear the political effects of majority taste' (Duncker 1992, 40).

More current explorations of the book industry have included examinations of the conglomeration of the industry, and of the rise of new phenomena such as book prizes and book clubs, which have had a profound effect on how the literary marketplace is run. They have also impacted hugely on feminist publishing – Virago is the sole survivor of the crop of presses that emerged in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s, and its identity now is radically different from that of its earlier years. It serves as a fascinating prism through which to view changing constructions of women's social, cultural and literary status – Virago's story, with its own cast of fascinating characters, is one that deserves to be told.

Notes

1. Interview with Marsha Rowe, 15 July 2004.