

‘What Did It Mean?’ A Generational Conversation

Lynn Edmonds and Rosie White

This chapter offers an edited conversation between two readers from different generations. Lynn Edmonds and Rosie White were reading *Spare Rib* at a time when they had little or no direct involvement with feminist activism. This discussion therefore reflects on the role of *Spare Rib* as a form of outreach, information and textual solidarity for feminist women outside the major British cities. The discussion focusses on the 1980s as a moment when *Spare Rib* was widely distributed through newsagents such as WH Smith, and was often seen as part of the opposition to the Thatcherite Conservative government. In the 1980s Lynn Edmonds was in her thirties and had left her job as a lab technician to become a full-time mother. When the family moved to Sussex in 1981 Lynn had two young children and she became involved in the peace movement, as well as studying Social Sciences through the Open University. The other reader, Rosie White, was in her late teens and early twenties during the 1980s, an office worker in Milton Keynes until doing a degree at CCAT (now Anglia Ruskin University) 1984–1987. In 1988 she moved to Lancaster to pursue postgraduate studies.

L. Edmonds
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

R. White (✉)
Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
e-mail: rosemary.white@northumbria.ac.uk

The discussion begins with some general questions about *Spare Rib*, such as ‘How did you hear about it?’ and ‘What did it mean to you at the time?’ Lynn and Rosie then go on to examine a selection of the digital material available via the British Library’s online archive in order to reflect upon how their memories compare with the facsimiles in the archive. The chapter offers an example of feminist praxis as a means of reflecting upon the impact of this key British feminist periodical. Both participants made a deliberate choice *not* to do prior research on the archive. Memory-as-methodology is attached to the radical history of feminist practice—an approach that resonates with current feminist work on feeling and affect (Bartlett and Henderson 2016; Hesford 2013). This is not to say that this dialogue is unmediated; indeed, the situation of the discussion is structured by the technology of the Dictaphone, the *idea* of doing the work of remembering, and how examples from the British Library archive initiate further memory or reflection. When editing the transcript of our discussion we have tried to maintain the sense of dialogue and humour that ran through it. This generational conversation is designed to generate laughter and further discussion—as it did for Lynn and Rosie.

Looking back in this manner can be understood as a political act in itself, in a social present that is so focussed on ‘going forward’. That bastardised phrase which now infects much managerial discourse is resonant of the way in which we are constantly encouraged to see ourselves as being in a state of movement toward some uncharted future. This ‘forward’ movement is predicated on a positivist ontology—that the future is always, somehow, better than now. Lauren Berlant (2011) calls this the ‘cruel optimism’ of late Western capitalist culture. There are few environments which actively encourage reflection upon what has happened or what is happening. The neoliberal university is itself circumscribed by temporal races to a photo-finish such as the UK’s Research Excellence Framework. Like the collection as a whole, this conversation runs counter to the imperative to be always ‘going forward’ in its simple project to remember, to re-read and to reflect upon the not-too-distant past. Women’s lives, in particular, are subject to the constant disappearances and erasures of ‘going forward’. This conversation constitutes an attempt to record a moment in the present—on 8 July 2016, between 3.45 p.m. and 5.30 p.m.—even as it attempts to record the remembering of our pasts.

HEARING ABOUT SPARE RIB

As outlined in the Introduction of this collection, *Spare Rib* was just one outcome of the seismic shifts in attitudes towards equality in the late 1960s and 1970s. As Edmonds and White discuss personal experiences of reading this magazine, they touch upon the wider social world in which it was produced. In particular, the Cold War that dominated international politics at this time. Politics is traditionally seen as a masculine domain, and the Cold War was personified by the US and Soviet political leaders at this time. However, in the spirit of female activism that *Spare Rib* fostered, women in Britain gave voice to a feminine anti-war movement in the form of the Greenham Common peace camps. Greenham Common was the US Airforce base in England, and was the site where it was alleged the USA held its nuclear weapons for use in a possible strike against the Soviet Union. Molesworth was the RAF equivalent base, and is mentioned in passing. Edmonds and White discuss growing up as politically aware young women in the 1970s with this 'can-do' sense of female empowerment growing in the background.

Rosie White (RW) So, the first question is, do you remember how you heard about *Spare Rib*?

Lynn Edmonds (LE) Not really. Not directly. I think I became aware of it, perhaps, at some point in the late '70 s,'80 s, but not in a personal way. It felt more of the background of things that were going on at the time. I would hear about it on some news or something like that, where there'd been a particular issue that had been highlighted, and they would have some kind of comment from *Spare Rib*.

RW On, like, TV or radio?

LE Something like that, yes.

RW Really? Wow!

LE It seemed to offer just a slightly different perspective. But I felt as though it wasn't for me, in a way. I felt it wasn't part of my life at that time. It didn't seem to impinge on my life. It was as though there were other things going on elsewhere that weren't part of what was going on for me. So I was aware that things were happening, and that, perhaps, *Spare Rib* was part of it, but they weren't, at that time, part of my actual life.

RW When you say it was referred to on the news and things like that, were people talking about it? Did people you know talk about it, or mention it?

LE No, not really. I've been reflecting on this since the idea came up to have this conversation. At the beginning of the '70 s, I was just 19. The world was such a different place! I don't think that we thought very much at all outside of the box. I don't think those of us who had fairly conventional upbringings and left school to go to work and things like that, our lives didn't seem to be part of the bigger changes that were beginning to happen. And so, we didn't talk about those kinds of things at all.

RW You didn't go to university?

LE I didn't. I started my working life in late 1969. I got married in '71 when I was just turned 21, and I had my son when I was 25 and my daughter when I was 27. So that was the mid to late '70 s. And so, during that time, I had an extremely conventional life and was just very much focused on working, and home, and those kinds of things. Don't think my thoughts really strayed outside what was, then, on offer at that particular time.

RW I know. It's really odd. Like you, I've been reflecting back and we're talking, primarily, here, about the '80 s. I haven't researched *Spare Rib* for this conversation. And the thing that I know from talking to colleagues is that it started off as a subscription magazine, but I remember it being available in newsagents. It was visible on the shelf. I don't know when I first became aware of it, or even when I first started buying it. I wouldn't say that I was a regular purchaser, either. I'd buy it occasionally. I did go to university. I took 2 years out between A-level and university. But I was already interested, even at A-level, in debates around gender and feminism.

But I regarded myself as having missed the boat. Feminism seemed to have already happened in the '70 s. So by the '80 s, I felt like I was very much in the end of things. And in part, buying *Spare Rib*, for me, was trying to find out about what had happened and what people who were real feminists were doing. Because I didn't feel like I was a feminist, because I was a bit too young and not really engaged directly, much, in political activism, apart from things at university and stuff, which was, I suppose, quite active at the time. There was stuff going on about the miners. But there was more, particularly, stuff going on about the campaign for nuclear disarmament. So, Greenham Common was really big. And I took part in an event at Molesworth one Easter. Did you read *Spare Rib* at all?

LE I don't think I ever read it cover-to-cover, but I do have a memory of reading bits out of it. And, if you're going to ask me exactly what they were, I couldn't tell you because I can't remember. I know that it did come into my consciousness at some point, as part of other things that were going on.

RW Did you actually buy it? Or, did someone lend it to you?

LE I think I was loaned it, I don't think I bought it.

RW I think that was a big part of it, actually. I think it used to be passed around. Because it wasn't cheap. I bought it occasionally, on impulse, largely, when it was dealing with something that caught my eye, or maybe when I felt particularly feminist! [Laughs] Because even buying it was some kind of statement. And having it in my room was a statement. So I associate it with identifying as feminist, even though I was unsure about what that, exactly, meant.

Magazines

Magazines for women have a long history, as discussed in the Introduction. Here, Edmonds and White discuss their experience of reading a range of magazines for young women, and in particular pick up on the fact that *Spare Rib* was conceived as a very different sort of magazine than the consumerist ethos of so many other mainstream magazines available at this time.

LE I was never, and I never have been, a great one for magazines, generally. I'm much more interested in books. You know, if I was going to get anything about a particular subject, I think I'd be more likely to try and find a book.

RW One thing I do remember was how it looked, and the fact that it looked quite hand-made. So, it was different. Because unlike you, I did like magazines. I was quite into buying *Vogue* and *Elle*, and before that, *Jackie*. *Spare Rib*, I think, I saw as a bit of an anti-magazine because it wasn't pretty and it wasn't as consumable in the way that those commercial magazines were. But I think that was also part of its appeal for me, that it was quite worthy. And I think, looking back on it now, it seems extremely worthy. [Laughs] I think looking back I'm bit more critical of it, perhaps, than I was then. I think then I saw it as representing a world that I was looking in at, very much from the outside, which was *real* feminism. And it was

all very political and... right-on, I suppose, would have been the term at the time.

LE I think when I became aware of it, I felt that it wasn't going to be about things that were in my life at the time. It never, kind of, jumped out at me as something that I felt that I needed to go and get. The lives that it was talking about didn't seem to be the life that I was living or the people I knew were living at that time. Obviously, times change and we change. And I wasn't sure whether it would've reflected me. Maybe I was a bit scared of it because I thought, perhaps, it was something that I should, but I was a bit anxious or nervous about. Because I knew I wouldn't be like the people who were, you know, who were writing it and who were living the lives.

RW That's really interesting because even though it wasn't a commercial magazine it was a *lifestyle* magazine. It represented a particular kind of lifestyle. And maybe that lifestyle was something that I was buying into because I was in an academic environment. Even though it wasn't an academic journal, it certainly related to the kinds of discussions and debates that were happening in women's studies at the time.

LE I suspect there was probably quite a divide between people who were intellectuals and at university doing those kinds of things, and those of us who weren't... Our lives seemed very divergent, whether they were or not is an interesting point to think about. And I suppose anything that's new and in the vanguard of things, it takes a while for it to come into more general consciousness.

RW I don't know that it was in the vanguard. I think, for me, as well, it seemed to represent a kind of establishment feminism. Certainly, for me, at that time, it represented this kind of feminism that I could not quite achieve because it already existed somewhere else, and I would never be there. Because I hadn't been there in the '70s I think I identified it as being produced for an older generation. And I felt a bit frivolous in comparison. [Laughs]

LE I suspect nobody was actually there doing whatever; people like to say that they are. Once you start digging behind it, you find that there's a bit of a front; they're as much of a shambles and doing things as badly as everybody else.

RW I think the thing about the magazine, like any magazine, it did present that front. It presented this notion of this feminist, radical, political lifestyle that it was about, or servicing in some way. But I don't know... I wonder whether it ever actually existed anywhere.

- LE Well, isn't that the same kind of thing, though, that *Woman & Home*, as an example, presents to its readers, this wonderful idealised lifestyle of gardens and cooking and whatever else. That's the thing about a magazine, it's not real. And even though we know that it's not real, it's hard not to get sucked into it. I always remember, from *The Simpsons*, when Marge is reading a copy of, was it *Better Homes (Than Yours)*, in brackets, and that's pretty much it! [Laughter] That's how people sell magazines, they're our aspirational and lifestyle choices. And, maybe *Spare Rib*... Well, it would have been different, but perhaps, those kinds of things were there because they have to sell.

1980s Activism

The emergent female activism that was most visible in the Greenham Common peace camps is not the only form of activism. Here, White and Edmonds return to the theme of activism that they started with and discuss the various ways in which women came to be involved in other forms of activism, describing their personal journeys and, in particular, the challenges that beset women activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Writing in the November 1980 edition of *Spare Rib*, Lucy Whitman had set out the case for female activism, particularly in the case of the anti-nuclear movement: 'I am convinced that nuclear weapons and nuclear power are in fact the most brutal manifestation yet of the murderous patriarchal system which has brought about so much misery throughout recorded history.' Such arguments were repeated in the pages of *Spare Rib*, where female activism shifted from a focus on gender equality to getting women's voices heard on a wider range of topics.

- RW What else were you doing at the time? Because you said that you were mainly involved in family and work and stuff like that. But I know you were getting involved in things to do with the peace movement?
- LE Well, yes. I think there was a little bit of a zig-zag path that way. Talking about feminism in the '70s, I knew nothing about anything. The political world out there, I had no interest in. It wasn't involved in me. And it was about 1978, I had a little boy who was two, and my daughter was a few weeks old, and I'd gone to look after the house of a friend who was away. And I was watering plants and things. And while I was there, there was a copy of *The Female Eunuch* on the table, which I took away and started to read at home.

And I can remember sitting, reading this book and looking at my children there, thinking, I wish I'd known about this two or three years ago! Why didn't anybody mention it earlier?! [Laughter] Because, well, you know, there's not a lot I can do about it now! So I was blown away by *The Female Eunuch* because it said things that had never once crossed my mind. I think I'd accepted the world very much as it was, and the way things were for women and for me. And I hadn't really questioned very much at all. But this was the very first thing that opened the door for me, and it opened it very wide. And so, that was very significant.

The other publication that was really very interesting to me was Susie Orbach, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*. I understood straight away what they were saying. I didn't have any difficulty with the concepts that were being discussed. It's just, I'd never heard them before. I felt a bit like Pandora's Box, the lid had lifted, and I began to see the world differently. I had to negotiate a place in it at the time, because I was a full-time mother. I was a full-time mother for about four or five years. And that felt strange, reading all these things.

RW Because they were opposed to motherhood?

LE I wouldn't say it was opposed. I think it was that it wasn't seen as a necessity, perhaps, that they saw it as a choice, which might seem blindingly obvious now, but back then, it wasn't...

You suddenly felt, actually, I do have choices, I did have choices. You know, life doesn't have to be lived on this very narrow path of what it is to be a woman, because people are pushing the boundaries and creating new paths and we can go off down them and things like that. But it's very difficult when you have two very young children, and what have you. So I felt my mind was, kind of, opened. But physically, you know, to live life differently, at the time, was quite difficult. And then I got involved in the peace movement when we moved down south.

RW So, where were you?

LE In Sussex, in a very nice village in the South Downs, and partly, for me, to be honest with you, it was a way of getting together with, I thought, like-minded people, because it was a very chocolate-boxy sort of a village. And that really didn't suit me terribly well. CND was big. And there were some local movements down there, which I joined. It was the first time I joined anything like that.

RW So was Greenham Common going on?

LE At the beginning, it wasn't. It was just beginning to start and I got involved with that because a few of us from the different villages, we had an umbrella group, and there were discussions around it then. We got a bus, a coach to take us up on... I can't remember, but I think it was December 1982, when there was the great big day. Embrace the Base. I went up for that, which I found quite scary.

RW Why? Was there a big police presence?

LE There was, yes. Why did I find it scary? It was the first time I'd done anything like that. I wasn't sure what it would be like. I wasn't sure about the kind of people who'd be there. I worried about silly things like, if anything happened and I was arrested, even though I wasn't doing anything, you know, what would the effect be on my children? So, I had this anxiety. But at the same time, I was very pleased that I had gone. And subsequent to that, because we lived within about an hour's driving distance from there, and a little group of us would go up from time to time with things and would stay once overnight, you know, kind of, support, and things like that.

So we did that. And also, the more generic peace group kind of things. Just flagging up what we saw as being warmongering and stuff like that going on. Again, I look back and I see quite a bit of naivety on my part there, which is okay. It was of its time. But it was interesting and I learned an awful lot from it about myself and about what was really going on.

RW I think my memory of the '80s is that a lot of active politics around gender seemed to be to do with peace stuff, Greenham Common. I think I said earlier, about going to Molesworth one Easter. And we circled the base and it was terrifying! We stayed overnight and the police were all in coaches and had somewhere to sleep, we had nowhere to sleep. It was wet. It was muddy. And that was my Greenham Common. But I wasn't even in the right place for that! [Laughter] You know, I think that's always been my experience: never in the right place at the right time! Always slightly missing it. But that's what I remember about that era, was that the nuclear issue was one of the central ones.

LE It really was.

RW Which I think is interesting, because I think, earlier a lot of it had been about violence against women, or Reclaim the Night. And that almost seemed to have disappeared to some extent.

LE I think people were beginning to see connections and parallels between what you've described about violence against women and, if you like, the bigger violence in the world. This massive connection with violence and ways of being that enhanced the violence and encouraged the violence. So, I think they were all connected in many ways and it just depended at any given moment, on where you were and what's going on in your life. Which part of that, kind of, circle you engaged with and came into, because you realised very quickly that they were all connected up, and different parts led onto different areas.

It was almost like a big web; there were all sorts of different directions you could go in depending on what was happening for you at the time and where you were.

RW And *Spare Rib* is one bit of the web.

LE It was, definitely. I think it was almost—revered isn't the word that I want... You know, received wisdom.

RW That's what I mean, I suppose, about it being right-on. And I don't necessarily mean that in a negative sense. But that it was seen to have a particular stance which was on the outer edges. Even though we've been talking about the commercial aspects of it. I suppose as well, its availability, the fact that you *could* go and buy it. And you didn't have to be part of a group or subscribe to some private list, it was very public.

LE And quite unique!

RW I suspect what's replaced it, really, is online stuff. That is now public access. But then, this is pre any kind of computing. It was the very late '80s when I even started using a word processor for academic work. And there was no World Wide Web. There probably was somewhere.

LE But not for most of us.

At this point the recorded conversation stops while Lynn and Rosie look at some of the eighties editions of Spare Rib on the British Library's online archive.

READING SPARE RIB NOW

To return to reading *Spare Rib* 30 or 40 years after first encountering it can be a surreal experience. The passion, optimism and vivacity of the magazine's editorial, with its hopes for gender equality and female

empowerment, appear to be from another lifetime. Here, Edmonds and White revisit some editions of the magazine from the 1980s and discuss issues that were developing in prominence at that point, such as race, sexuality and social class.

RW One thing that caught your eye, Lynn, was this editorial (*Spare Rib* 137, December 1983), and it says:

We hope you are sitting comfortably as you read this. We've had a lot of interesting responses to the changes at *Spare Rib*. *Spare Rib* is no longer a white women's magazine. All issues have a connection, white with black, wealth/poverty with Imperialism, and we must pursue that recognition. *But*, issues on which black or third-world women want exclusive space will be acceptable to *Spare Rib*. We are not denying the difficulty of all this for many of our white readers. But who ever said that taking on an overdue challenge is easy? We are all committed to feminism, to women's liberation, but not at the expense of fighting racism, including white feminists' racism. We ask you, our readers who are white, to learn about and engage *with* us in the process of change. We need our readers in order to survive, but we need to meet the urgent realities of racism (and other injustices) in order to survive and grow as feminists.

This reminds me of what happened to The Women's Press. About the same time, I think, '83, '84, they had a massive editorial split over just this subject. About the issue of having a quota for black women's writing? And that same discussion is happening here. But it is a bit full on. It sounds like it's taking on everything! And that's something that *Spare Rib* seemed to do. It seemed to address everything at once! And looking at the contents page from this issue: Dance and Feminism, Socialism, Recipes, Racism, Children's Books, Women in Prison, Theatre. And there is a sense of exhaustion with it!

LE That's what I felt. This is December 1983. I was working part-time, I had two small children and was trying to manage a home. And looking at the content, exhausting is the word that I would use. I felt I had a lot of plates spinning in my life. And the actual involvement I did have in the peace movement, and things like that, at the time, was just about all I could manage in terms of anything else. Perhaps I stepped away from some of these things, simply, because I knew I couldn't manage them.

RW The issue of time is really key, isn't it? How much time do you have to think about these things? To deal with them? To read the kind of books, or the plays, or the poems that they're publishing, but also reviewing? It does speak to a privileged reader, who's got spare time, who's got a certain amount of money, potentially. But the other thing, was that this is the era of dole, you know, when actually being unemployed was not necessarily great, but it was certainly a lot better.

It was almost like, you're out of work, you sign on, and you can get by on what you're getting. You get rent rebate, you get a certain amount each week. And it's not a lot, but it's survivable. Whereas, I think, now, that's certainly not the case.

LE Absolutely not.

RW If this spoke to a privileged woman, and perhaps an academic woman, perhaps it is also, in part—I don't know how much—talking to women living in squats or on the dole.

LE Right. And there's a thought I have as I read these issues [of *Spare Rib*], that it doesn't just induce exhaustion; in me, it would also induce guilt. Because I know that if I spent a lot of time sifting through all these things, I would feel guilt. I'd feel guilt that I was not in the position of a lot of women. And also feel guilt that I knew that there'd be very little I could actually do, personally.

I suppose what I chose to do in my own life was to try and make the changes that I thought I could manage to, and stay afloat. And I was aware of all of the other issues that were going on, but I knew I couldn't cope with them. And I suppose, if I tried to get more involved with them, I would've been either exhausted or feel so guilty that I wasn't being able to do what I might have wanted to do.

I think all of us have a capacity to do things. And all of us have different capacities to do things at different times in our lives. But there are times when we just need not to, actually. It can feel too hard, or too much. And that doesn't feel good because you feel you're letting others take the strain. I think, one of the things about getting older is you do look at things in a different way, and it feels much more all right to do that. But it didn't feel so good then. Does that make any sense?

RW It does make sense. I think one thing that I thought about *Spare Rib* at the time... And I think, still, looking back on it now, is that it sees itself as a consciousness-raising tool. And I think that's great, but I think part of the problem with consciousness-raising is, you know, what consciousness are you raising?

THE IMPACT OF SPARE RIB

As Edmonds and White say, *Spare Rib* excelled at 'consciousness raising', although the actual issues being raised could be somewhat muddled in the eyes of the readers. Here, they discuss the longer-term impact of this, particularly in light of recent revelations of widespread sexual assault by 'celebrities' in the 1970s.

- LE Oh, that was really good: 'The A to Z of Feminism' [*Spare Rib*, Issue 136, November 1983]. When you read through it, so much of what was cutting edge and in the vanguard then, is mainstream now, or it seems to me that a lot of it is. Which is absolutely fantastic! And, you know, if people hadn't been prepared to stand and be counted, then it wouldn't have been as it is. That's the irony of it all.
- RW I think that's what's good about this archive. And also, there's the *Sisterhood and After* archive on the British Library website [<http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood>]. And both of them are about the second wave. I think it's really important to remember it because it's so easy to forget how different things were.
- LE Well, I think you've only got to look at recent court cases about the abuse of children and young adults, to see that what went on then would be completely unacceptable now; particularly [the behaviour] of men towards women. It was part of the wallpaper; nobody questioned it. Which is why the Germaine Greer book blew me away, because we suddenly realised, actually, things don't have to be like this. And there's a completely different way of looking at things, and being in the world, that doesn't involve all that. If people can think about it and be prepared to put their heads above the parapet, *then* things can change. Yes. We're human beings and we make mistakes, and nothing's ever going to be exactly right, but by god, when you look back and see the changes! When I compare them to 40 years ago, it's just incredible! I mean, I could not have got a mortgage then, in the early '70 s, without a man—either my father or my husband.
- RW It does beggar belief, I think! Obviously a lot of changes came through legislation. And that legislation's driven by argument, activism, debate.

- LE Absolutely! This is the huge value of things like *Spare Rib* and the people who were working in them; that they are prepared to put forward a completely different interpretation of the world. And get enough people to back it up, to say: 'Actually, you're right!' And, you know, we don't want to do this anymore, we think we should be able to get a mortgage, or whatever it is?! And the whole thing about equal pay, and maternity leave, and—contraception, for god's sake! You know? All of that has been fought for, so hard, by amazing women! And I just feel a very lucky beneficiary of it.
- RW I think the fight goes on, as well.
- LE The things that people have got can easily be taken away. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.
- RW Do you think that's why there's such a sense of exhaustion about all this? I mean, if the price of freedom *is* eternal vigilance, then... You've got *Spare Rib*, which is constantly banging on about different kinds of freedom. And some of it you don't want to see or you're tired of hearing about. Or it gives you a sense of guilt to keep hearing about it.
- LE Yes. I think I do. There're so many of the things that we take for granted now... I mean, look at what's happening, for example, about abortion in America. And, you know, people's views on things change all the time. It is exhausting because it's like most things, you strive to get them, and then when you get there, you've got to strive to keep it. And then we're all tired and, oh, I just want to lie down in a darkened room! Let somebody else do something for a while! I can't deal with this. But it's certainly better than the alternative, which is, everything stays the same!
- RW I think one reason that I kept buying it, for some of the time, was that it, as you say, had a different view on the world. But also—how can I put this?—there were debates going on in the magazine. That's clear from, like, the editorial and the letters pages. It was also not simplistic, but it had quite a simple outlook. One thing that I find difficult now, in the current environment post-Brexit, as we speak... things are quite depressing, but incredibly complex as well. I'm not saying this is a more complex time than the '80 s, because I think there were complexities then, but I think one of the strengths of publications like *Spare Rib* was that they had a fairly straight-forward... Even though there was argument within the ranks...

LE I think, yes, in those kinds of things are pearls, aren't they? Where you can actually see one side and another. You just reminded me—when there was a bit of a ruckus about the young woman, I think it was Charlotte, and I can't remember her surname. Anyway, she was a barrister, and she put her profile up on LinkedIn, and got a response from a senior partner in one of the law firms in London, commenting on her photograph and what-have-you. And then it all blew up.

I remember being so angry with someone who could not understand that... it's 2015, as it was then, and people still think it's all right to judge and comment on a woman's looks. Even the person said, well, have you seen the photograph? And I remember saying, yes I have, actually! It's a full-on facial with just a neck. I said, she's got smart short hair, she's looking directly at the camera. What? It's like a passport photograph. And if she'd been messy, or pulling her face or her hair, you'd have been commenting on that, you know? Because you think she's attractive you're commenting on it? If she wasn't smartened up there'd be comments on that.

I felt as though the last 40-odd years hadn't happened at that point. I felt a bit despairing with that. And then, there was a whole hoo-hah in the press. And I was thinking, how? Why don't people get that it's not all right? You wouldn't do it to a bloke. You wouldn't think that it's all right to do it to a bloke.

Dungarees and Mushroom Clouds

In this final section, Edmonds and White continue their discussion of 'The A to Z of Feminism', focusing on the stereotypical image of the Second Wave Feminist as being clad in dowdy, asexual dungarees. However, there is also the ever-present nuclear threat that hovers over their reminiscences of this period, showing how feminism had become involved in international politics, through publications such as *Spare Rib*.

RW There's something about this in 'The A to Z of Feminism'. I thought it was really good, in the sense that it represents the practical aspects so that the first entry is: 'A, for abortion', and it gives the link to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service. So it was very pragmatic in talking about law and talking about women's rights. But there's also some funny things in it. So under B, the first entry is 'Battered Women', and they give the address of the Women's Aid

Federation. But the second entry is 'Battle Axe'. And it says: 'Slang. Aggressive woman, harridan, virago, Amazon, lesbian—all those women who don't comply with conventional ideas of femininity. Keep up the good work!' [Laughter] That's great! And where was the other one? Oh, yeah, 'Dungarees'!

LE They were a nightmare.

RW Right! But, even now, I think, the media stereotype of the feminist as a dungaree-wearing man-hater, with hairy legs, blah, blah, is still... I don't know how that survived!

LE It's so easy to dismiss. It's being a minority view.

RW I know, but it's just such a media construction. And it says here under D: 'Dungarees. The straight media's stereotype of what feminists always wear—preferably baggy and shapeless. Some of us have never pulled on a pair.' And then in brackets it says: '(But nevertheless, the issue of comfortable, practical clothing remains an important issue.)' [Laughing] And I thought; that just encapsulates it!

LE [Laughing] Absolutely! And dungarees are *not* comfortable, practical clothing!

RW Did you wear them in the '70 s?

LE I had one pair of quite sweet pink ones. But because of the toilet issue, it didn't last very long.

RW They're not practical at all. You have to get undressed.

LE I ended up with the straps down the loo many a time. [Laughter] And I thought, you know what, this is very unhygienic! And I hit myself in the face once or twice with it, and I thought, no, these are going to have to go. So no, they didn't last long. They were very pretty. [Laughter]

RW Was there anything else in here that you picked out?

LE The Miners' Strike.

RW The November and October 1984 issues both reference Women Against Pit Closures. I think *Spare Rib* was very interested in the fact that it was working-class women organising, which was unusual at the time, and still, to some extent, is.

LE Have you seen *Made in Dagenham*? I think an awful lot more of it went on, but it wasn't deemed quite as newsworthy as it might have been. I mean, yes, the Miners' Strike was that writ large, and it did give an awful lot of women a much more powerful voice, and

a completely different view of themselves and the world than they might have had, had that not happened. I just think it's sad that so many people had to lose their livelihoods, and communities were wrecked, to enable that to happen. I'd rather it had happened in a more positive way, if that makes any sense.

RW In an awful way, you can see that some of those women who were against pit closures, who remained in those communities, are now living with the fallout of that.

Because those communities are devastated in all sorts of ways.

LE Indeed.

RW Maybe it's my choices, or maybe it's what's on the British Library website for the 1980s issues [of *Spare Rib*], but the two things that seem to keep coming up... Well, three things, actually. There's the Greenham stuff, the peace stuff. There's the Women Against Pit Closures stuff. And then, there's also the stuff about race.

LE I suppose, I mean, obviously, the issue about race is ongoing. In a sense, those other two have disappeared.

RW Because there aren't pits anymore. I was aware of the Miner's Strike. Buckets would come around in the Students' Union. But, for me, the nuclear thing really dominated the early '80s.

LE Very much so! It was huge!

RW It was such a huge issue! And I remember being genuinely afraid.

LE Expecting it!

RW Mutually-assured destruction was certainly on its way.

LE And it could've happened. We're very lucky it didn't! When I used to live in the South Downs, I used to think, one day I might turn around and look at the Downs, and I'd see a mushroom cloud.

RW Oh, that's spooky! That image of the mushroom cloud was very... You know, they used to put it on magazines like *Spare Rib* and in films... And you didn't have to say what it was, everybody knew. I'm not sure the students I teach now would know what that means, or the resonances of it at the time.

LE I remember—and I was the only one who did it, and it took up a lot of my time and some evenings—when the film *Threads* was going to be showing. I had hundreds of leaflets, and I was putting them through the doors of so many people and I was scared. I'd,

kind of, creep up and put one through. Because I knew I'd get a mouthful, you know, 'Are you Russian?' or something like that.

RW Really?

LE Oh, we got a lot of abuse!

RW Is that because it was rural, southern England, conservative?

LE I think so. And that was another part of this exhaustion; thinking, I can't keep on doing this! You know? I can't keep taking this.

RW I think that's a difficulty with any kind of activism, including feminist activism, which is it's often about putting yourself publicly on the line. And it is such a dangerous thing to do. And I think, particularly dangerous for women because we are attacked in so many different ways. Yes.

CONCLUSION

Spare Rib is a magazine that embodied female emancipation and empowerment in 1970s and 1980s Britain and continues to provoke debate and discussion today. The issues it raised in its pages remain pertinent and, through a cross-generational discussion such as Edmonds and White's, we can see how there is less distance between its readers now and then than might have been expected. The use of the discussion format for this chapter has allowed a semi-structured interview to tease out otherwise obscure nuances of the experience of Second Wave Feminism.

REFERENCES

- Bartlett, A., & Henderson, M. (2016). Social memory and feminist cultural histories. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 30(2), 273.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hesford, V. (2013). *Feeling women's liberation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Whitman, L. (1980). Nuclear weapons: Stay home and die. *Spare Rib*, 99, November, 25–26,



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-49309-1>

Re-reading Spare Rib

Smith, A. (Ed.)

2017, XIII, 238 p. 2 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-49309-1