

Melissa Benn returns to Ruskin feminism

# Herstories

In the early 1980s I remember taking part in countless conversations among assorted feminists about the diversity and fragmentation of feminist politics since the late 1970s. (Sometimes it seemed that all feminists of the early 1980s *ever* talked about was difference.) Looking back, it is easy to see that we were still in some way in thrall to the pioneers of the second wave - what they had done, how they had thought, the political forms they had used. Consciousness raising and conferences. Everyone wanted to hold conferences, just like the good old days. Then, just as abruptly - I date it from around 1986 - that conversation stopped. Nobody knew what feminism was anymore, where it was going or what it should do. It was as if we didn't care any more. We let it all go, post-modern style.

But that letting-go shifted our perspective on the pioneers of the second wave. It put them into another time, another place. And this book - a series of interviews with some of the 600 women who attended the first women's liberation conference at Ruskin college in 1970 - reinforces that shift. This is a valuable historical document - replete with all the details of history, the fashion, the hair, the different work and money culture of the period. In **Once A Feminist: Stories Of A Generation** (Virago, pbk £6.99) Michelene Wandor begins her introduction with just such details: 'On a chilly Friday in late February 1970 I dressed carefully in a mini-sweater dress, long black leather boots and an ankle-length black and white heringbone coat...' Juliet Mitchell is remembered too for her long coat, her blonde hair, her confidence (but then all the women, as women do, remember all the *other* women as confident, articulate, more powerful than them).

For this of course was the 60s, in spirit if not exact time. Most of the women at Ruskin were angry young women with degrees or the 'graduate wives' of

the male Left of that generation. (Sheila Rowbotham says simply, 'I wanted working-class women to come to Ruskin. They didn't really.')

These were women reared in the postwar period, the women whose childhoods are so complexly evoked in Liz Heron's collection *Truth, Dare Or Promise*. They had received education, many were class-mobile, myriad possibilities were on offer. But still they could not find a voice.

This is the paradox at the heart of that generation, a generation born in rebellion against silence who then found a more powerful voice than any generation since the suffragettes.

French theorists like Kristeva and Cixous have meditated much more than we prosaic Brits on the peculiar quality of women's silence within language and politics; their outsideriness. But here are powerful anecdotal descriptions of how strangled the women of that generation felt. Janet Ree writes of living with a man on *Black Dwarf*, the newspaper of the International Marxist Group, of going along to meetings with him, 'and after one I wrote that I cheered along with the rest but I felt inside I was absolutely detached from what was going on. I wrote in capitals in the diary - "Where was I? Where was me?"' Audrey Battersby describes how 'I always took a back seat. I rarely said anything. I went, and did, and demonstrated and whatever. But I was still the little woman.'

If pre-Ruskin was silence, Ruskin itself was cacophony. Slogan-painting, passionate debates. Smiles and friendliness everywhere. When they come to make the film of the book, Ruskin should be filmed like the scene in *Reds* where crowds storm the Winter Palace - a surging, urgent blur of activity. Reading the accounts, you gain more of an impression of heightened excitement than a record of what was said, by whom or about what (although documents from that time are appended). Lois Graessle writes of her feminism,



Angry young women of the 70s

'Something hit me immediately. I felt at home, familiar.' Others use the analogy of falling in love. There are exceptions; Audrey Wise, who had a long history of trade-union activity and came to Ruskin to connect the priorities of working-class woman to the middle-class woman, who 'loved it', but did not find in it personal salvation.

Where do generations born out of revolt go? What do they go on to do? Who do they speak for once their voices are heard? The women in the book divide into those who returned to a kind of personal life, and those who have made feminism the basis of their work - in art, journalism, psychoanalysis, history, whatever. Amanda Sebestyen is perceptive about the disparities between a 60s' and an 80s' work cul-

ture: 'Now if you criticise some-one's work sharply you're also threatening their livelihood.' None of these women talk about career or ambition. It was all about making enough money to survive and getting on with politics.

The Ruskin generation are a highly successful generation, in a 60s' not an 80s' sense. They helped change the world. They are also a highly, perhaps now too highly-documented, generation. It's another paradox, that history will probably connect more than divide them from the men of that generation against which they rebelled, the very men of the New Left, *Black Dwarf* and the Communist Party whose reflections on their anniversary of 1968 were equally as well recorded the year before last. •