

1 Introduction

To conjure, even for a moment, the wistfulness which is the past is like trying to gather in one's arms the hyacinthine colour of the distance. But if it is once achieved, what sweetness! – like the gentle, fugitive fragrance of spring flowers, dried with bergamot and bay.¹

I can time-skid, if they cannot, I can go to them, if they cannot come to me.²

Reprinting, republishing, re-covering.³ Selling old texts in new clothes. It is a well-established commercial practice in publishing, as old as the modern industry itself.⁴ What conditions enable a book that has slipped out of cultural view to resonate (again) with contemporary readers? How do titles that have fallen *out* of time become activated in another, historical present? In what ways do publishers help audiences reach consensus that a 'forgotten' text can belong to *the* or *this* contemporary moment; that an 'old' book is, in fact, relevant and timely? There is, of course, no single answer to this question, no formula for success that will, in every instance, transform a text's fate from obscurity into cutting edge publishing opportunity.

¹ Mary Webb, *Precious Bane* (Virago, 1978/1924), 6.

² Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (Virago, 1979/1949), 41.

³ I am grateful to Carmen Callil, Virago Press, Alexandra Pringle, Kate Griffin and Peters Fraser & Dunlop for permission to quote from unpublished material in this Element. Thank you to Carmen Callil, Lennie Goodings, Lucy Delap, Zoë Thomas, Rebecca Lidster-Lyons and two anonymous peer reviewers for their generous feedback on this work. Special thanks to Margaretta Jolly, Principal Investigator of the Leverhulme funded Business of Women's Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing project (RPG-2017–218), without whom the opportunity to do this research would not exist. Thanks also to the archivists at Special Collections, University of Reading, for helping me access materials during the pandemic, and to Eleanor Dickens and Rachel Foss for supporting my research in the Carmen Callil and Virago archives, held at the British Library.

⁴ Richard Altick, *English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago University Press, 1957).

Reclassification – conferring ‘Classic’ status upon an already existing text – is one technique through which books from the past are elevated and awarded cultural distinction. This Element is not, however, focused on the practice of canonisation, or that perennial question of the literary critic: ‘What is a Classic?’⁵ Instead, it is concerned with the practice of timing and how timeliness is culturally constructed within discrete historical contexts. When marketing a book (and indeed any cultural product), timing is everything. Ensuring a book is ‘hot’ requires planning, creativity, resourcefulness and opportunism; even more so when finances are limited. It involves identifying audiences and synchronising their attention, cultivating nascent and possible desires. Once an audience has become captive, the iron has to continually strike to maintain its heat. This *sense* of timing, realised when the audience adopts the time embedded in the product as their own, acquires a peculiar hue when the book is not germane to the contemporary environment but is, rather, salvaged from a distant, and largely unknown, past. In such circumstances, how can the book be presented as timely? What temporal mechanisms are mobilised to ensure ‘then’ is commensurate with ‘now’? This Element explores these questions by focusing on the reprint publishing of feminist publisher Virago Press, between the years 1973 and 1989.

Virago founder Carmen Callil’s early publishing industry experiences were as a ‘publicity girl’ for London-based publishers André Deutsch, Panther and Granada, ‘one of the few jobs available to women who did not want to be secretaries’ in the 1960s and early 1970s.⁶ When Virago was established, the specialised knowledge about marketing and publicity honed by Callil was emboldened with newly acquired executive power. Started in 1972 by Callil and *Spare Rib* founders Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott, Virago incorporated as a limited company in 1973. Between 1973 and 1976, Virago operated as an

⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (Harvard University Press, 1983). T. S. Eliot (1945). *What is a Classic?* London: Faber; reprinted in T. S. Eliot (1957). *Of Poetry and Poets*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, pp. 53–71.

⁶ Carmen Callil, ‘The Stories of Our Lives’, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2008. www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview2. Last accessed 28 January 2020.

editorial imprint of Quartet Books and became an independent company in 1976. This independence afforded the key figures who established the Virago enterprise in its early period – Callil, Harriet Spicer and Ursula Owen – the editorial and entrepreneurial freedom to develop their lists.⁷

Many Virago employees were skilled in the penetrative craft of promotion. The company's logo, a bitten apple, mirrored *Spare Rib's* appropriation of biblical symbols used to justify the demonization and social marginalisation of women for several millennia. As Virago grew from the late 1970s through to the 1980s, the company understood and leveraged the value of 'free publicity'. Reviews, features, radio and TV interviews were all used to great effect to raise the profile of Virago's books and authors beyond what was expected for a 'medium-sized' publisher.⁸ In particular, Virago were adept at weaving compelling stories around and about their published books. These tales combined narrative, imagery and design, tastefully presented on attractive posters and postcards. Such marketing materials enabled readers to understand Virago titles and embrace their wider publishing concepts.⁹ Importantly, publicity stories constructed the timeliness of Virago's books, cultivating a notion that Virago titles were worthy of the reader's time, attention and, of course, money.

While the Virago Modern Classics (VMC) series, established in 1978 and still core to the company's publishing today, is the most enduring and successful example of Virago's reprint publishing, this Element also draws on other texts Virago reprinted between 1973 and 1989.¹⁰ Overall, it elaborates how and why reprints were a vital ingredient in establishing Virago as a leading mass-market publisher of women's writing. Chapter 2 considers the Virago Reprint Library which republished early twentieth-

⁷ For more on the histories of Virago, see D-M Withers, 'Enterprising Women: Independence, Finance and Virago Press, c.1976–93', in *Twentieth Century British History* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwz044>, and Catherine Riley, *The Virago Story: Assessing the Impact of a Feminist Publishing Phenomenon* (Berghahn, 2018).

⁸ 'Virago Press Business Plan 1987', 38. Add MS 89178/1/95, BL.

⁹ Mukti Khaire, *Culture and Commerce: The Value of Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries* (Stanford Business Books, 2017), 37.

¹⁰ Up to the end of 2020, 715 titles had been published in the VMC.

century historical research and autobiographies such as Ray Strachey's *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement*, Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* and *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, edited by Margaret Llewellyn Davies. Chapter 3 focuses on Virago's republication of Vera Brittain's *Testaments*. Brittain's memoirs proved financially lucrative for the company, bolstered by the popularity of the 1979 BBC serialisation of *Testament of Youth* and accompanying rights sales to mass-market publishers Fontana (Britain) and Seaview (USA). Chapter 4 analyses the material qualities of the VMC, tracing how the books entered and became rooted in public space. This chapter also considers the manner in which the series' design features converged, in contradictory ways, with 'retro-chic' aesthetics strongly associated with other 'heritage brands' such as Laura Ashley.

These different aspects of Virago's reprint publishing between 1973 and 1989 are situated in relation to historical ideas that circulated in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s – ideas that were decorative, affective, regulated, mnemonic, tactile, aesthetic, conservative, insurgent and temporal. Within these 'structures of feeling', the idea of women's literary tradition came into focus first for a specific group – women's liberationists – and then broadened out to resonate with wider, popular audiences.¹¹ The diverse, historically inflected textures of the era acted as cultural holding grounds that enabled Virago's acts of reclassification and recovery to take root in space and time. I designate these distinct ideas as History (Chapter 2), Remembrance (Chapter 3) and Heritage (Chapter 4). Cutting across – and through – these historical terrains meant Virago's reprint publishing could reach audiences and, crucially, break away from the women-centred movement that were the publisher's initial readers (and writers and researchers). Echoing through this Element is Raphael Samuel's invitation to historians to be 'interested in the conditions of existence of history itself', wherein the 'sense of the past, at any given point in time, is quite as much a matter of history as what happened within it'.¹² To understand the cultural

¹¹ Raymond Williams and Michael Orom, *Preface to Film* (Film Drama, 1954).

¹² Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, 1994), 15.

impact of Virago's reprint publishing of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is necessary to tease out the different textures of historicity – those distinct 'sense[s] of the past' – that reframed marginalised and largely forgotten books as relevant and timely, stunning readers with awareness that, as Marion Glastonbury wrote in 1979, 'Female emancipation, we *now* realize, is no longer a joke, a fad or a lost cause, but unfinished business of some *urgency*. Rebels of the past, whose ideas until recently seemed as absurdly dated as their hats and hemlines, *speak to our condition*. The forgotten women who laboured in tenements and sweatshops left messages which transmit to us their buried hopes.'¹³

Virago's reprints were successful with readers, as I will elaborate on throughout, because, as feminist texts, their political purpose was legible. Beyond that resonance, the historical inflections of late 1970s and 1980s British society meant republished or 'retro' cultural goods had social meaning. As Samuel observed, the post-war period was characterised by an 'enlargement of the notion of the historical' in everyday life.¹⁴ Anxieties about a diverse range of 'vanishing worlds', be they 'natural' or 'industrial', strengthened a conservationist spirit that had been ignited in the mid-nineteenth century, inspiring a range of social and practical activities that served to revalue and recirculate 'the past'. Virago's reprint publishing – the publisher's organisation and curation of women's literary heritage – took place in a context wherein 'heritage, as it crystallized in the late 1960s' became 'a cultural capital on which all were invited to draw'.¹⁵ Acts of resurrection and preservation, coupled with pride in collection and display, had fomented cultural milieus that would come to embrace the republication of feminist texts, plucked from obscurity and designated by the women-centred publisher as 'Classic'. Virago's reprint publishing was released into a receptive environment, in other words, responsive to the call of the past, and increasingly adept at decoding the cultural value of recirculated goods.

Alongside the profusion of the past in the present, the 1970s was also an era that had 'caught up with' feminist ideas. Feminist movements of

¹³ Marion Glastonbury, 'When Adam Delved and Eve Span', *Times Education Supplement*, 1136, 28 December 1979. My italics.

¹⁴ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 152–3. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237–8.

the nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially those that advocated for women's social, legal and economic independence, had fashioned 'odd women' who were 'ahead of their time' and, therefore, 'untimely'.¹⁶ Feminist knowledge, dispersed and fragmented across history, was 'untimely' in the Nietzschean sense: lives, events and ideas that exceed the historical conditions in which they emerged and, while sometimes receiving recognition in their own time, do not always become a lasting fixture of the cultural, social and political landscape.¹⁷ The 'untimely' history is, however, not wasted or 'used up' when it occurs; it lives on as sedimentary possibility, trapped in the materiality of texts and artefacts (and sometimes passed on as living memory), waiting to be reactivated at a different historical time amenable to its message and meaning. This untimely quality of Virago's republished texts was recognised by Callil, and Virago's readers. Replying to Claire Hardisty in reference to the republication of Brittain's work, Callil wrote: 'you made me realise why we publish some of the books we do, most particularly your thought that Vera Brittain reflected very accurately not only the historical incidents of a very eventful period but the preoccupations of large numbers of people [in the present]'.¹⁸

In 1970s Britain, ideas about women's liberation vernacularized rapidly. This Element, in part, outlines the unique contribution made by Virago Press as a commercial publisher in this process, retracing the contexts and mediums through which their publishing gave feminist cultural narratives, drawn from the present and the past, wider social mobility. It was an era in which socio-technical conditions (especially the wider availability of birth control) and shifting legal frameworks enabled class- and race-privileged women to experiment with feminist ideas and practices in everyday life. Within this context independent women – much as the Virago directors

¹⁶ George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Penguin, 1993). First published in 1893 and republished by Virago in 1980.

¹⁷ See Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time and Non-Linear History* (Palgrave, 2014), 66–7; Deborah Withers, *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission* (Rowman Littlefield International, 2015), 87–121.

¹⁸ 'Carmen Callil to Claire Hardisty, June 1980', Add MS 89904/1/194, BL.

styled themselves as – exercised bodily autonomy with a freedom previous feminist generations dreamt of, but did not directly benefit from.¹⁹ It was in the 1970s, in other words, that a feminist modernity, incubated since the mid-nineteenth century, concretised, for some, as lived possibility. This constituted a historical moment in which the ‘untimely’ feminism of the past became aligned with feminist times opened up and probed in present, where the ‘residues or effects of psycho-symbolic conflict’ which reproduced feminist grievances across generations were acted out and woven, deeper, into the fabric of culture, economics, law, politics and society.²⁰ Society had finally ‘caught up’ with feminism and the ‘untimely’ women writers of past eras whose words, imaginations and impulses struck the off-beats and discords of social life.²¹

Feminist times were rarely harmonious within the WLM, however, especially for those unaligned with the movement’s diverse political tendencies. For Callil, Virago’s founder, the socialist feminism she encountered in her own feminist era felt restrictive, punitive and, from a business point of view, inefficient.²² Callil’s political exile from the feminist present propelled her search for textual solidarity with other, literary outsiders, often housed in the stacks of the London Library, which she gorged on,

¹⁹ For further discussion of socio-technical conditions and autonomy see D-M Withers, ‘The Politics of the Workshop: Craft, Autonomy and Women’s Liberation’, *Feminist Theory* (June 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1464700119859756>; for an exploration of women’s liberation and everyday life see Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the Women’s Liberation Movement 1968–Present* (Oxford University Press, 2019); for Virago and discourses of independence Withers, ‘Enterprising Women’.

²⁰ Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (New York University Press, 1995), 245. Alexander viewed the repetition of feminist grievances across history through a psychoanalytic frame.

²¹ See Sally Alexander interview by Rachel Cohen (2012), *Sisterhood and After: The Women’s Liberation Oral History Project*, British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue, reference C1420/45, transcript page 13/track 4, © The British Library, the University of Sussex; Will May, ‘The Untimely Stevie Smith’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 29: 3–4 (2018), 381–97.

²² Paula Weideger, ‘Write On!’ *Ms.*, July (1988), 46–51.

night after sleepless night.²³ Like Allen Lane, whose publishing “genius” lay in the selection of titles [used] to build the brand image, a selection partially based on his own taste,²⁴ VMC were very much a ‘brand identity’ hatched from Callil’s obsessive reading, moulded in the image of her cultural and aesthetic predilections. Such tastes were rigorous, too, anchored in a Leavisite conviction about the moral worth of English literature, an orientation shaped, Callil has commented, by her schooling in Australia.²⁵

Callil records, with emphatic humour, that she was ‘afflicted’ by her undergraduate English Literature study in the ‘passionately Leavisite English department of Melbourne University’. She claims it motivated her ‘to put a bomb under Leavis’s agonizingly narrow selection of “great” novelists’. The feminist publishing terrorism unleashed by the VMC was rooted in a ‘moral urgency . . . articulated through the literary-critical idiom’ that shaped Callil’s formative reading, and sculpted her social position.²⁶ Within an individual reader such sensibility is personally significant; for a reader who becomes a publisher they acquire power not only to publish, but extend the parameters of taste beyond their singular, reading experience. In Callil’s case, the extension of her reading habitus reached mass markets. This meant the moral valuation of women’s writing was distributed to a wide audience, a reconfiguration of reader perceptions into a scene of persistent desire. As Callil developed the VMC in the late 1970s, she was carefully guided by another smart literary-critical hand, the American author Elaine Showalter, who pursued her pioneering study of the

²³ Callil, ‘The Stories of Our Lives’.

²⁴ Alistair McCleery, ‘The Return of the Publisher to Book History: The Case of Allen Lane’, *Book History*, 5 (2002), 161–85, 168.

²⁵ Carmen Callil, ‘Women, Publishing and Power’, in *Writing: A Women’s Business*, ed. Judy Simons and Kate Fullbrook (Manchester University Press, 1998), 192.

²⁶ Carmen Callil, ‘Virago Reprints: Redressing the Balance’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 September 1980; Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 155.

'Female Tradition' despite not being 'say, F.R. Leavis's sister – the great woman critic who would get everything right'.²⁷ *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, was published by Virago 27 April 1978 and sold 3034 copies by April 1980; impressive numbers given how the book preceded the explosive growth of feminist academe in the 1980s.²⁸ Published before *Frost in May*, the first VMC launched in June 1978, *A Literature of Their Own* became the unofficial sourcebook for Virago's literary recovery work.

Virago's embrace of reprint publishing in the mid-1970s was also a matter of financial expediency. As a newly established independent entrepreneurial firm, Virago faced financial challenges. A company statement from 1978 proclaimed:

We are the only British feminist publishing house for the general market (a second one [The Women's Press] is starting this month). The response to our work has been enormous: we have a wide review coverage on our books . . . our only problem is lack of capital to finance all the work we wish to do. We were aware we started as an independent company considerably undercapitalized . . . our lack of capital is a constraint in taking on new books, and means limiting the scope of our list until our back list has been built up over a few years. We need capital to support our projects for those intervening years.²⁹

²⁷ Elaine Showalter in *A Virago Keepsake to Celebrate Twenty Years of Publishing* (Virago, 1993).

²⁸ Stefan Collini suggests that by the late 1970s sales of literary critical texts were in decline. He does not account, however, for the growth of feminist criticism and its popularity into the 1980s. See Stefan Collini, "'The Chatto-List': Publishing Literary Criticism in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain', *The Review of English Studies*, 63 (2012), 634–63, 662. Sales for *A Literature of Their Own* taken from 'Dear [blank] from Kate Griffin, 14 May 1980', University of Reading Special Collections MS 5223, Box 11.

²⁹ 'Company statement', Add MS 89178/1/8, BL.

Establishing a profitable backlist at appropriate speed and scale was, therefore, a financial necessity for Virago. Reprinting old books was a cost- and time-effective way to do this. The first book published by the independent Virago in 1977 was, significantly, a reprint of *Life as We Have Known It* by Co-operative Working Women, edited by Margaret Llewellyn Davies. It went on to become one of Virago's bestselling titles of the period. Initially published by the Hogarth Press in 1931 and graced, fortuitously, with an 'introductory letter' by Virginia Woolf, the book spoke to a readership drawn from the WLM that was stimulated by political fascination with – and elevation of – working-class women's lives, as I elaborate in Chapter 2.³⁰ Acquiring publication rights for existing titles was cheaper than investing in advances for new books written by untried authors. Reprints were also cheaper to produce due to technological changes in the printing industry. By the mid-1960s, photocomposition was the dominant method for typesetting texts, largely because it could be effectively combined with offset printing.³¹ This created novel aesthetic effects for Virago's early reprints, as page proofs were reproduced from text settings of earlier hardback editions, as I will analyse in Chapter 4. With the right title, reprints could prove financially lucrative, as was the case with Virago's republication of Vera Brittain's memoirs, where rights were sold to mass-market publishers Fontana, a story covered in Chapter 3.

Virago were early adopters of 'Midway' or 'B Format', commonly known today as trade paperbacks. Trade paperbacks were pioneered by Paladin, a paperback imprint of the Granada Publishing Group launched by

³⁰ See, for example, Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain', in *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation*, ed. Michelene Wandor (Virago, 1990), 28–43, on the desire to express solidarity with working-class women by WLM activists, and George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (Bloomsbury, 2019) for detailed exposition of the centrality of class to the WLM.

³¹ See Sarah Bromage and Helen Williams, 'Materials, Technologies and the Printing Industry', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 7, The Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. Andrew Nash, Claire Squires and I. R. Willison (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 47–8.