Lois Chaber: “Confessions of a (non)English OAP Reader”—or How I and WSG Survived

After last month’s posts, you might think that organising an informal women’s studies group is a piece of cake. But there are always teething troubles. In the third of our series reflecting on the history of the Women’s Studies Group 1558-1837, and celebrating our book Exploring the Lives of Women (Pen & Sword, 2018), Lois Chaber gives her “Confessions of a (non)English OAP Reader”—or How I and WSG Survived ...

Out of the thick murky mist emerges an illumined scene of figures around a table—no, not Hrothgar’s mead-hall rising bright from the dark moors, but the blurry memory of my first WSG meeting—female scholars drinking tea, not warriors downing beer, sometime in 1988, the year after the group was founded. But if my first memory is not clear, what is clear is what the Women’s Studies Group: 1558-1837 meant to me and did for me.

Where I was coming from, literally and figuratively, gave special meaning to my entry into WSG. I had recently come to London after a long sojourn in the Middle East, living through the Iranian Revolution in that country and feeling the effects of the Iran-Iraq War in Qatar, struggling to teach Austen, T.S. Eliot et al., to students with mostly basic English with few intellectual colleagues, and pursuing research with dinosaur technology—no email, no internet, just eighteenth-century articles, photocopied and sent by a hired graduate student of an American friend, making their slow way across continents to my desk, and hefty books ordered from Blackwell’s in Oxford—sent at great postal cost. Driven to England by my husband’s pursuit of a one-year business degree at LSE, we had hoped to leave London after a year to settle in New Zealand, but for a combination of reasons, London became our default home. I was an American Anglophile with a skimpy CV, trying to write an article, in isolation, on Pamela’s cheeky treatment of John Locke in Richardson’s unloved sequel.

But serendipity rescued me from wallowing in self-pity. My American friend, Carole Fabricant, a distinguished Swift scholar, chanced to be in London at the time of our arrival on these shores, and directed me to meet her in a pub—my very first one—where my American naiveté found me trying to order a Brandy Alexander and nearly getting booted out of said pub. Carole happened to know Yvonne Noble, told me about her women’s studies group, and gave me her contact details. When I called Yvonne, I was promptly invited to join WSG, and started coming to the meetings. The ‘herstory’ of WSG’s founding belongs to Yvonne; I was just an early member with modest ambitions who fell in love with WSG and became a dogged hanger-on.

At the meetings, I got to know Mary Waldron, another independent scholar like Yvonne and myself, all of us looking for a refuge from scholarly isolation. I also have fuzzy images over the next few years of getting to know various women with faculty positions, such as Carolyn Williams, Penny Richards and Clare Brant, as well as graduate students like Sarah Prescott and Emma Clery, who found WSG a resonant sounding board for their work-in-progress before moving on to successful academic careers. Two WSG presentations particularly stand out. Isobel Grundy, before the
Canadians seduced her away from us with an offer she couldn’t refuse, regaled us with a talk on ‘Cheerfulness in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*’—a counter-intuitive view of that notoriously autumnal novel, which won my heart by a close reading of the text that slowly but inexorably proved her case about the sunny form that Austen’s stoicism took. The second is an early talk by Mary Waldron countering another critical truism—a reading of *Mansfield Park* in which she argued that Austen intended Fanny Price to be a flawed, wrong-headed character—an interpretation which eventually became a chapter in her book, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* (1999). Interesting that my first impressions of WSG were of women going against the grain!

And all this time I was too paralyzed with fear and shyness to open my mouth during the post-presentation discussions. Even though the first article I’d ever written in my Middle Eastern isolation had wound up in *PMLA* (beginner’s luck!), I felt terribly inferior to all these British scholars—even the graduate students—partially because I had no academic position (though a few others were in the same boat), but mainly from the conviction of being a country bumpkin, an innocent abroad in the Mark Twain tradition—and those teddibly educated British accents all around me were quite intimidating. The gradual forging of a bond with Mary, and the friendly, non-competitive atmosphere of the group, eventually held sway, and after the first year or two in WSG, I began to find my voice.

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It was WSG that alerted me to BSECS and encouraged me to attend. Nevertheless, I have dug up my first ever programme for the annual meeting, only to find a telling example of the sticky conditions women scholars often have to operate within and why it’s so helpful that WSG is a welcoming and supportive place for them to be: threaded in haphazardly amongst the innocent and amateurish single sheet of the 1988 BSECS programme (a far cry from current BSECS slick, professional programmes with their multitudinous parallel sessions!), I had scribbled in biro the following self-instructions in order to accommodate going to the conference while my husband was studying full time: ‘check girls [my two small daughters’] schedules’; ‘Have to arrange for pickup of girls & possibly (?) getting them to Brownies’; ‘arrange with Denyse for pick-up & keys to house’—and so on. Evidently it all worked out in the end as I have notes on the various speakers’ talks.

It is a triumph for WSG’s growing intellectual status—and its persistence—(mainly through the ongoing efforts and enthusiasm of Carolyn Williams) that after many years we eventually achieved a slot as an official panel, within the main time framework of the conference, during the later Oxford phase of BSECS—climaxing in 2015’s *TWO* WSG panels!

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Back to our own regular seminars: I finally worked up the courage not only to take part in discussion but to present my own paper in 1991, encouraged by what I had
perceived as the unspoken ethos of WSG: to provide a supportive, constructive audience in an egalitarian context. I was working on a new project—the treatment of childbearing in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, Part II* and *Sir Charles Grandison* and offered a talk on this topic for one of the monthly seminars. As this was my first speaking occasion before a WSG audience, even my awareness of its usual friendliness didn’t stop me from having the jitters. When I arrived at the venue, lo and behold, only two other members had turned up to listen—Peg Katrizky and loyal Mary Waldron. Nevertheless, this ‘fit audience though few’ managed to give me some incisive feedback, which laid the basis for a tighter version of these ideas for the ISECS conference that year and eventually, for a substantial article in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. And this experience underscores one of the major virtues of the WSG seminars—their openness to *work-in-progress*, work not necessarily complete or perfectly polished, so that authors can receive feedback that helps their work develop further. This WSG tradition has proven especially useful to graduate students and to young scholars in the very early stages of their career, as well as to independent scholars with no university structure to support them. (The downside of this, I must say, however, is that while some remain fiercely loyal, many fledgling scholars have in the past deserted WSG when their careers took wing.)

This first experience as a speaker also pointed to the flaws in our earlier WSG structure. The (probably) overambitious goal of having a speaker every month all too often led to similar situations of scholars arriving at the seminar only to discover a disappointingly small audience—since these scholars were sometimes not even WSG members, they often felt let down at the underwhelming reception, and thus not disposed in the future either to join the group or to offer another talk. Later on, when we re-formed, Mary Waldron and I for quite a while had the responsibility of soliciting speakers for the sessions. Eventually, our present system, of having fewer sessions but more speakers at each—to gratify our speakers and make their efforts worthwhile by luring more punters into London, emerged from discussions, and, I believe, has worked well through to the present day.

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Speaking of burdens, my last concern in these ‘confessions’, by way of enlightening newer members of WSG and plucking the consciences of older ones, is this: Yvonne Noble, as a major founder of the group, initially took on the responsibility of running all aspects of this group on her own—a virtual Atlas heaving under the weight of WSG. The WSG members from this time period (and I am ashamed to say I was one!) allowed her to carry this burden alone for far too long. With her internationalist viewpoint and idealistic goals of widening the horizons of WSG, she made contact with feminist scholars outside the UK—in not only her native US, but also in many places in Europe, and coaxed them into becoming speakers, or at least members, of WSG. The membership ballooned, Yvonne’s duties swelled to enormous proportions and, inevitably, when Yvonne was offered a teaching post for a year at New York University, the group burst—and collapsed.

Finally, the implications of this crisis became clear to us, and a group of interested members met (at my home, in fact) to re-launch WSG on a more sensible and sustainable basis. We agreed to set up an organising committee and to share out all
the responsibilities that Yvonne had taken on singly, a structure that has generally worked well to enable the WSG that we know today—with Carolyn Williams as our gadfly, nudging us into the unknown territory of WSG publications as well. It’s not a perfect structure, to be sure, as there remain issues of further democratising the group and giving the non-committee WSG members more of a say in suggesting activities and making decisions, a goal rightly insisted on by Yvonne and one highlighted by the members’ survey she created a couple of years ago now. We still have much to achieve in reaching that goal—one of the sticking points being where and when to have a ‘real’ AGM and how to get our geographically-scattered membership to attend—but as a witness of WSG’s own survival of its ups and downs—most recently our ejection from Senate House and quest for pastures new—I have faith that solutions will be found for this and that the future for WSG is bright and promising: the world is all before us...