Marilyn L. Brooks: Home thoughts from abroad

Every scholar has had that moment when they’ve wondered if they’re ever going to get their project done, or get their enthusiasm for their subject back, whether it’s because of administrative overload, physical or mental ill health, or precarity. Groups like WSG can form a supportive network to researchers, particularly those who find themselves outside traditional academic structures. In the fourth of our series reflecting on the history of WSG and in honour of our new book Exploring the Lives of Women (Pen & Sword, 2018), Marilyn L. Brooks recounts how WSG has been a resource for her through the years.

I’ve found it extremely interesting and very enjoyable to be given the opportunity to look back over the history of the WSG and its influence on my life and well-being.

I came to academia late as a mature student in my 30s. I must have joined WSG in the mid to late 80s after being encouraged to make contact by Marie Mulvey-Roberts at a BSECS conference. This was my first opportunity to immerse myself in women’s studies. At the time, the period coverage was narrower, starting at 1600, but it firmly included my own specialism of eighteenth-century women’s literature and Mary Hays in particular. Right from the start I found a welcoming and encouraging atmosphere nurtured by the warm support and enthusiasm of Yvonne Noble, Lois Chaber, Mary Waldron and Linda Bree. I was struck by their belief in sharing our interests with others. During my MA studies at Queen Mary College, London, Chris Reid and Isobel Grundy also urged me to become involved in the meetings. I wasn’t able to attend regularly because my work for the Open University took place on Saturdays but those I could get to I found inspiring, not least the chats during the breaks. I was pleased to see that one of my MA students, Marion Durnin, went on to be a committee member.

I gave a paper ‘Mary Hays and “My Struggles to Free Myself”’ in April 1988, which led to a regional Day School in Cambridge two years later called ‘Appropriations of Power’ (with the encouragement and administrative help of Yvonne). Another paper ‘Mary Hays: Reluctant Radical’ was given in 1996. This was followed by a joint (with Nora Crook) centenary conference on Shelley/Wollstonecraft in 1997 in Cambridge which was advertised through our group, with several members attending and offering papers.

In 2000 I had to retire from work through ill health (I had been diagnosed with Bipolar 1 disorder over 40 years ago and my condition was worsening) and, on medical advice, moved to southern France (for the light) so I was unable to come to meetings and I soon started to feel geographically and psychologically isolated (one of the reasons why Yvonne wanted to form the group in the first place). As well as cancelling my subscription to BSECS, Women’s Writing, and Enlightenment and Dissent, I decided that WSG also had no further interest for me so I didn’t renew to that either and dropped off its mailing list. How many times did I say to myself ‘Do I need to know that so-and-so had published such-and-such or that, for example, a BARS conference ‘Women, Money and Markets (1750-1850)’ will take place at Kings College London in May 2017’? Well, yes I did and yes I do. I remember feeling that my isolation (geographical and psychological) was increasing by knowing what I was being excluded from so I thought STOP. I don’t know when I decided how much I missed knowing what was going on in my subject area but after some years I decided to renew my subscription. I was glad to know for instance, that Janet Todd had published Death and the Maidens and Anne Stott had a book out on Hannah More, both of which I later read and enjoyed. I probably
wouldn’t have heard of these elsewhere. I’ve noticed a very impressive progression from quite basic/rudimentary information to a sophisticated notice board giving dates on events and access to essential databases such as the Orlando project led by WSG member Isobel Grundy.

Would I go up to the Foundling Museum if I could? Well yes I would. Workshops to which participants are asked to bring a 5-minute contribution shows the Group’s commitment to inclusion and participation especially relevant to newcomers. I saw that one recent workshop was advertised as offering discussion and conviviality, both of which are always guaranteed.

At times I’ve thought I can’t attend meetings therefore I’m not a real member. But of course I am. After rejoining I’ve felt that badly-needed intellectual support through the mailing list, sometimes two or more items arriving in a day.

The publications I thought I’d lost interest in after early retirement actually became central to my life here – a way of connecting. A major resource has been the members’ interests list.Scrolling down it I found Susan Purdie and Sarah Oliver shared my interest in William Frend and their article on his relationship with Mary Hays gave me a badly needed boost and being in touch has been a great boost to me. We’ve been lucky to have this extensive resource of members’ interests eg 4 Sep 2016 Judith Hawley asked for help with her work on Joanna Baillie and I am sure she got it. I was also asked for advice regarding a forthcoming viva on Mary Hays and was glad to offer some.

I have to admit that the frequent receipt of notices of events sometimes seemed to reinforce my feelings of isolation from the academic world but latterly I came to see this as a badly needed lifeline. I’ve found myself carefully reading the extensive synopses before each group meeting as if I could almost feel that I was going to attend. I like to know what’s going on and thus feel included. Do I need to know that our workshop on seventeenth-century portraits of women will take place on 6 May 2017 at the Foundling Museum? Well, yes I do! And maybe I’ll be able to come.

The format has become more and more sophisticated over the years and we must applaud the contribution made voluntarily by members. The coverage is impressive and a respected outlet for other sources e.g. BARS, academic blogs, outings, cfps, etc.

I should say that suffering from my worsening bipolar illness has fed this isolation even more by removing any input I would have liked to make. This is where the notifications have given me hope that my interests can resurface. In fact, due largely to the circle I find myself in I am silently encouraged to pursue my research on William Frend even though it looks very unlikely that it will come to completion. I’ve had to accept that some things are no longer possible but that I can still get enjoyment out of them. I’ve felt nurtured by interest in my work outside a competitive forum. The Group has unknowingly given me the courage to carry on.

I think this is due to the nurturing support of the WSG. Thank you Yvonne for the vision and thank you all for fulfilling it.