Vicki Joule and Sarah Oliver: How to organise a WSG workshop

The biggest event in the WSG’s calendar is always the annual workshop. In the fifth in our series exploring the history of WSG and to coincide with the recent publication of Exploring the Lives of Women (Pen and Sword, 2018), members Vicki Joule and Sarah Oliver remember their roles as Committee members and workshop organisers, and some of the most memorable events WSG put on.

VJ: After several years of membership, Sarah and I were invited onto the WSG Committee and slipped into the organisational roles of co-treasurers and workshop organisers.

SO: Yes, between 2008 and 2012. There were ups and downs, but we had fun. Most of the preparatory work and head-scratching was carried out in my kitchen, but thankfully, Vicki never let the paperwork, emails and the hastily scribbled notes between us go.

VJ: Our way of managing these roles reflected the ethos of the Group: we shared, discussed and laughed. My enduring memory of our time together as co-treasurers and co-workshop organisers is firmly located in Sarah’s attic-flat, which is appropriate for scholars of eighteenth-century writers as it evokes the image of the stereotypical Grub Street hack. We spent many an hour working in the eaves albeit with warmth, good food and drink so actually far from the conditions of those attic-writer dwellers. Sarah’s open plan and richly-coloured interior, like a cross between a Moroccan and Italian roof terrace, seemed to invite relaxed and lively conversation, and our WSG work-meetings trickled into other meetings. Sarah’s tables and floors would be spread liberally with papers and Sarah would make sure the food and wine were equally if not more liberally spread.

Once the papers had been sorted and workshop folders packed, other women would arrive for book clubs, conversation and, on one occasion, baking where we exchanged our skills in pastry and scone-making. The WSG community seemed to have an impromptu base in the South West through Sarah and one that extended beyond the membership and official meetings. As our time as Committee members came to an end, we continued as members and our local book club had become well-established and the concerns and interests that WSG promoted were evident in the club. Whether we read ‘old’ or contemporary books, the question of women often emerged in our discussions.

Workshop 2008 – ‘The one with the journal’

SO: I remember that our first Workshop culminated in a wonderful collaborative project. The discussion that closed Marie Mulvey-Roberts’ and Joanna Goldsworthy’s ‘Mothers and Daughters’ session turned to the idea of gathering a collection of articles for a journal to commemorate one of our founder members, Mary Waldron. Marie offered to oversee the collection’s publication in the journal, Women’s Writing. As we had recently completed our PhD studies, Vicki, Daniel Grey and I were anxious to flex our muscles as Committee members and so we offered to act as
guest editors. We had no idea what this would involve, and in the end, because they were invaluable in the process, we added the names of the readers to the list of editors, which must be the longest ever seen in literary history!

The project took several months, with each article read by two readers and passed on. Daniel wrote the Introduction the night before the deadline, emailing me well into the night: I think we worked until 3am, but we did it. The journal edition was entitled ‘Women Out Loud’.

The 2008 WSG workshop poster

VJ: The purpose of the WSG workshops is to learn from the expertise of the speaker on their chosen subject and then for the attendees to share their own contributions on the theme of the day in the spirit of collaboration. When Sarah and I took on the workshop organisation we kept to this successful format. As I look through my WSG folder it reminds me how productive and interesting these sessions were. In finding contributions for the workshop theme, attendees are required to think differently about their research and, if there are no connections, to look further afield for an example. The results are always surprising. For our second workshop, led by Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, the title was ‘Women and Wax in the Age of the Enlightenment’ (2009). This set a challenge for attendees, and for us to find a suitable and not off-putting picture of ‘women and wax’ for our publicity material! The talk was fascinating and Elizabeth took us on a tour of the cultural significance of wax from its scientific value including anatomical models to the symbolic and literal connections with women with wax dolls. The Group rose to the challenge in finding wax in the eighteenth century and I have an eclectic mix of papers as a result.
Workshop 2010 – ‘The one with the animals’

VJ: For me, our 2010 Workshop had the most communal and also special feel; this is partly due to the speaker, Jane Spencer, and how we had the tables set back so that following the talk we could move into a circle. It was wonderful to be able to introduce the woman who had inspired my interest in eighteenth-century women writers with her book *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* and, later, with whom I had the pleasure of being supervised for my PhD. There was also something about the topic – women and animals – that inspired so many exciting contributions and there was a real energy of interest in the room.

SO: Yes, I too remember that very exciting day, Vicki! This was another of our mad catering ventures, although at this stage, we didn’t have much difficulty in organising it (more later). However, we enhanced the buffet table, as usual, with small vases of flowers and luckily, found some charming animal printed napkins – much to everyone’s amusement.

2012 Workshop – ‘The one with the catering’

SO: We must have foregone the pleasure of organising the 2011 workshop, but neither Vicki nor I can remember why [Teresa Barnard convened the 2011 workshop, featuring Prof Ann Shteir on ‘Myths of Flora’ – Ed.]. But, for me, the most abiding memory of this 2012 session is our anxiety over the catering at Senate House (of all things). On previous occasions, arrangement for the morning tea and coffee, buffet lunch and afternoon tea had been very easy and it had been handled by the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies. All we had to do was to ring them, speak to Flo or Angela, order what was needed and they invoiced us.
However, somewhere between 2011 and 2012, this had changed. After many telephone calls to London from Exeter, I finally managed to find out that someone called Chris had taken over the job of dealing with the catering and I wish, on this occasion Vicki, you had offered to take it on! After a dozen attempts I heard a voice on the end of the line who assured me that there was no problem. Chris asked what was required, and in response to my request for an invoice said there was no need. We were to put the cheque under his door when we were leaving!

If that wasn’t enough, the venue had been changed to a room in the bowels of Senate House. On a recce beforehand, I remember our panic as we tried to envisage what we could do if there was no sign of coffee and therefore, of course, there would be no lunch or afternoon tea. As workshops were held on Saturdays, there would also be no one around to ask. We planned to dash to Marks and Spencer for tea, coffee, milk, napkins and armfuls of sausage rolls. We would make the refreshments ourselves by borrowing a kettle and getting water from the bathrooms.

What a relief when the morning of the workshop arrived, and the tea trolley was sitting there complete with a friendly smiling face who assured us that lunch and tea would be taken care of. During a break in the afternoon I wearily mounted the stairs, found the relevant door and gratefully pushed the envelope containing the cheque beneath it. The workshop itself was a resounding success, with an excellent talk by Professor Gill Perry on portraits and female celebrity.

**Co-Treasurers**

**SO:** At the AGM on Saturday 5th July 2008 it was announced that as the current Treasurer had been unwell for some time the role had to be re-filled. Not knowing what we were letting ourselves in for, Vicki and I offered to help and were officially appointed. Carolyn, who was safe-guarding the books, was to hand them over to me when we were next in London and a meeting was arranged. I imagined a thin folder, but I’ll never forget the moment when Carolyn D Williams and I met at a bus-stop and she handed two very large, arm-breaking bags filled with ledgers and various papers! No problem; or so I thought as I struggled to take them back to Exeter. When we arrived at our local branch, we were summarily rejected. As far as the Bank was concerned, they had never heard of us and they didn’t want us to bother them! We had chosen a time when the bank had merged with another; the bank was in chaos, and there was a very long line of irate people waiting to get attention besides us. However, we did attempt it again, and this time we were offered an appointment. The previous Treasurer’s Bank was contacted. We signed numerous forms in triplicate. Honour was served and order emerged from chaos.

**VJ:** We also received and sent emails from members regarding their research interests and publications which Louise Duckling needed for the website. The best part was that members often sent us lovely messages and postcards when submitting their subscriptions.
**SO:** But all good things come to an end, and when the Committee decided to respond to requests to have subscriptions dealt with by Paypal, we both thought it was time to call it a day. There had been highs and lows in this experience but the best part was being in constant contact with the community of full time academic women as well as independent scholars who, although busy with jobs, family and homes to look after, supported the Women’s Studies Group in all kinds of ways.

**VJ:** Finding Sarah at a WSG meeting when we were both working through our PhDs set in motion a friendship that would bring us and others together. We had met in the South West before, as we both attended the Symposia and Conferences held by Exeter and Plymouth Universities, but it is in London that I really remember us securing a connection both intellectually and physically on our shared long train journeys to and from meetings. Fittingly, our first meeting was at a WSG Workshop in 2004, which was on the collaborative and creative intellectual community of the Bluestockings and their legacy, and was led by the excellent scholar Elizabeth Eger ahead of her National Portrait Gallery special exhibition. My tendency to archive means that I still have the delegate list complete with Sarah’s handwritten addition of her personal email address and telephone number.

We continue our Women’s Studies Group connection albeit in rather different places. Sarah is no longer in her flat and I am now living in a 1930s house bordered by Welsh mountains, and the Bristol Channel is now in between us. But, on a clear day you can see across the water to the South West and Sarah and I will in our various ways maintain our engagement in women’s writing as we now intend to try writing together.

**SO:** Yes, I very much look forward to spending some time in Wales, planning our future collaborative writing. In the meantime, the Book Group continues – sometimes in my tiny house, situated a couple of miles away from my former City Centre flat. However, since I have some Toulouse-Lautrec prints in the sitting room which leads on to a small courtyard garden, my home now suggests Montmartre rather than Morocco.

Thank goodness for WSG, the friends and contacts we made over the years, but most important of all, the memories we share.