



'Balancing on a Razor's Edge': Running the Radical Feminist Lesbian Onlywomen Press

Gillian Murphy

To cite this article: Gillian Murphy (2021) 'Balancing on a Razor's Edge': Running the Radical Feminist Lesbian Onlywomen Press, *Women: a cultural review*, 32:3-4, 442-456, DOI: [10.1080/09574042.2021.1973735](https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973735)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973735>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Dec 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 92



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

‘Balancing on a Razor’s Edge’: Running the Radical Feminist Lesbian Onlywomen Press

Abstract: This article follows the story of Onlywomen Press as told from the archives they created, which are now available in the Women’s Library at LSE. Onlywomen Press was Britain’s first radical feminist lesbian printing and publishing company. Founded in 1974, the press had two aims: to publish lesbian women’s writing and to enable women to control the print production process itself. Being part of the women’s liberation movement meant not only recognizing their oppression but also opting out of the mechanisms that supported that oppression and creating new ways of working. This article will show that while their vision remained constant, it was extremely difficult to achieve and remain financially solvent.

Keywords: Britain, feminism, finance, radical feminist, lesbian, Lilian Mohin, Onlywomen Press, publishing, women’s liberation

Onlywomen Press was founded in 1974 by a group of radical feminist lesbians. They believed it was necessary to create a women’s communication system, away from patriarchal influence, which they would control themselves, by printing their own books on their own presses with their own hands. The blurb on the back of their first feminist poetry anthology, *One Foot on the Mountain* (1979), sums up their objectives and passion:

Onlywomen Press is a women’s liberation publishing and printing group, producing work by and for women as part of creating a feminist communication network and, ultimately, a feminist revolution.

Achieving commercial success was not a goal – the goal was to publish ideas and enable debate about ideas that were not talked about or accessible.¹ The focus was on what would cause change. ‘We all believed in the revolutionary power of words’ reflected Lilian Mohin on the early years of Onlywomen Press (Jackson 1993: 45). Sheila Shulman added: ‘To us women’s printing and publishing wasn’t about a job or a career; it was about politics. We would both be doing the feminist revolution by writing and printing and publishing and we would be furthering it by the work we were getting out’ (Jackson, 46). However, such aims needed financing and this article considers this aspect of Onlywomen Press.

The first step in this revolution was learning to print and Lilian Mohin, Sheila Shulman and Deborah Hart enrolled on a two-year printing course at Camberwell College of Art, becoming the first full-time female students on this course (6OWP/3 folder 4). Learning the physical process of printing made the women think more carefully about how books were produced and made them more realistic about what they could publish. As the Women’s Press, they printed several pamphlets of poems using the college equipment.² They also designed a Women’s Press Calendar 1975 and posters.³ Jacky Bishop joined the group in 1975 and remembered sitting in meetings talking politics and binding by hand copies of Astra’s poetry pamphlet (Jackson, 47). They could not afford to pay to get it bound but, more importantly, they wanted to do every part of the process themselves. They sought the help of lovers and friends to sew pamphlets but the helpers would never do it twice. When the printing course ended in 1976, Lilian went on to study binding and paper production for a year at the London College of Printing. She then spent a year as a jobbing printer – the only woman in a commercial print shop.

A bombshell came in the spring of 1977 when, embarrassingly, they became aware of the existence of another the Women’s Press, part of Quartet Books, whose name had been registered at Companies House. At this point, Virago was the only other feminist publisher, established in 1973, but many more would follow in the 1970s and into the 1980s: Pandora, Stramullion, Honno, Black Women Talk, Sheba and Scarlet Press are just a few (Chester 1989; Riley 2020). Setting up a women-only publishing house was no mean feat in a male-dominated book world and various business models were followed. Being part of an existing publishing house was one way as shown by Virago, the Women’s Press and Pandora. Profit was as important as politics for Carmen Callil at Virago, Stephanie Dowrick at the Women’s Press and Philippa Brewster at Pandora. This model, however, was not something that Lilian would entertain because making a profit was not her objective, but being in complete control, from initial idea to the printed page, was.

1 Personal communication Anna Wilson (collective member of Onlywomen Press).

2 The pamphlets produced were *Finding Food* by Judith Kazantzis (1974), *Fighting Words* by Astra (1974), *Deviation* by Judith Barrington (1975), *It’ll take a long time* by Janet Gooch (1975) and *Cracks* by Lilian Mohin (1974).

3 Titles of posters were Six Demands, Pig Identification Chart (reprint from Shrew), Still You Have done Nothing, Women’s Monthly Event, Women’s Fair and International Women’s Day handout 1977, Women’s Cinema, ‘Only Anger is Love’, ‘The war outside ...’. From Onlywomen Press’s archive at the Women’s Library at LSE (6OWP/1).

Being forced to come up with a new name made the group discuss the need to set themselves up as a legal and physical entity which did not compromise the collective decision-making, the lack of hierarchy, they were committed to.⁴ By the autumn of 1977, the group had composed a list of questions for Susan Olly, a feminist lawyer, who was providing her expertise for free: what did non-profit mean and was it of any use to them? Could they discriminate in favour of women if they were a non-profit business? What identity would allow them to operate as a business but also receive funding from charitable institutions? (Jackson, 49; 6OWP/2 folder 1). Answers to these questions are not revealed in the archive but, in minutes for 16 March 1978, there is an asterisked note to register Onlywomen Press as a business name, to open a bank account and begin accounts (6OWP/2 folder 1). They later regretted their choice of name, as it caused confusion, but at the time, they felt it represented what they were trying to achieve. They had decided to become a company limited by guarantee, a construct grounded in co-ownership and not a capitalist company run for private profit.⁵ They did not want to be a co-operative as they saw this movement dominated and controlled by men (6OWP/1).

Setting Up as Onlywomen Press

Onlywomen Press (OWP) acquired its first premises and equipment through loans from friends (see [Figure 1](#)). Their first location was in Mare Street, Hackney, which included an off-set litho A4 press left by the previous occupant, and rent was £5 a week. Through loans they bought a second-hand A3 Rotaprint and a plate-maker. The presses were old and simple and gave ‘small but persistent trouble’ as noted in the minutes (4 May 1977 6OWP/2 folder 1).

Once they had equipment, the women began to take in printing jobs, ranging from leaflets and posters to pamphlets.⁶ They did a lot of work for various women’s groups but drew a line at printing wedding invitations. They hoped the printing would generate enough income to pay for the books they wanted to publish and to purchase better machines, as sometimes lack of necessary equipment prevented groups, such as the Rape Crisis Centre, from transferring all their printing requirements to them (6OWP/4 folder 3). Simple accounting is noted in the first minute book with payments from East End Women’s Festival and Y B A Wife [Why Be A Wife campaign] for completed work (6OWP/2).

A printing service carried out by women was greatly appreciated and welcomed. In July 1979, a letter from Monstrous Regiment Theatre

4 They considered Battleaxe Press and potential logos as shown in the minutes see 6OWP/2 folder 1.

5 Many feminist businesses went for this option, see Cholmeley 1991.

6 *Spinster* is an example of a run of journals that Onlywomen printed.

Company stated that they were often badly treated by designers who produced work that went against the spirit of the theatre company. They welcomed the co-operation and professional service of OWP (6OWP/4 folder 3). The National Women's Aid Federation also endorsed their printing work – it was important that printing was being carried out by women who understood their aims and the basic ideas of their work, suggesting, like the Monstrous Regiment, that other printers failed to produce what they wanted.⁷

Despite endorsements, OWP found that the printing work was insufficient to cover the production costs of publications. Funds had to be found from elsewhere and writing applications to charitable trusts and public funding bodies, and compliance with subsequent conditions attached to any grants awarded, became a full-time job for Lilian Mohin. The physical running of the press passed to Brenda Whisker, although, in practice, everyone went on doing everything – printing, artwork, invoicing, writing grant applications.⁸ As early as October 1977, Lilian was in contact with the Arts Council but this was not promising because of 'rigid categories' (24 October 1977 6OWP/2 folder 1). She was going to try the Gulbenkian Foundation and apply for the working of the whole press and the reprinting of what they had already produced. There were no qualms about applying for money from a public body and, like other small presses, they thought it best to take advantage of this money regardless of its political ties. In 1978, OWP reprinted the pamphlet *Fighting Words* by Astra and *Cracks* by Lilian Mohin on their own presses but they had ambitions to publish books. They wanted to publish an anthology of British feminist poetry and Lilian applied to the Greater London Arts Association for funding. An award of £450 was granted towards production costs in September 1978 (6OWP/25 folder 1). However, the scope of the project grew and they now wanted to include poems of 55 women with photographs and biographical notes. They initially intended to print this on their small, old machines but discovered that binding costs would have been prohibitive if the book was done on the paper size their machines could handle. Instead, they would have to use an external printer, but OWP would create the cover. Their revised costs for a print run of 2000 meant that they had to make a further grant application. Lilian applied to the Arts Council for £1090, the estimated deficit, and in March 1979, they were awarded £1000. They borrowed another £1000 from friends (6OWP/1 folder 3). The actual cost must have been much higher as much work was carried out for free.

OWP encountered many problems with external printers contracted to print *One Foot on the Mountain*. Lilian pointed out the issues to Edwin

7 For an overview of women in publishing and printing see Cadman et al. 1981.

8 Personal communication Anna Wilson.



Figure 1. Lilian Mohin and Sophie Laws with printing press (reproduced by kind permission of Anna Wilson and Sophie Laws).

Buckley & Co Ltd in a letter dated 27 June 1979 (6OWP/4 folder 3). To begin with, the artwork had been imposed incorrectly by their platemaker so corresponding pages were in the wrong order. These books had to be reprinted which affected distribution and OWP incurred additional charges for this. OWP also had several copies returned to them because of binding errors with pages missing, duplicated or in reverse order. The printers had also not produced the correct number of books. It was difficult to quantify these mistakes financially but Lilian was keen to point out that their reputation as publishers was at stake as this was their first anthology of poetry which had been produced badly. Lilian wanted a deduction of £794.02 from the total of £2087. The printers accepted their liability. This scenario shows what a difficult position OWP were in as they could not afford the necessary equipment to print books and had to rely on third-parties who then let them down. This was another transgression from the original aim of printing their own work but an unavoidable one if they were to publish women's words.

The Women's Liberation Movement saw the emergence of many women's groups, such as the Arsenal Women's Group, which often included women writers and those involved in publishing, journalism and advertising, and informal networks of support and advice developed (Riley, 69). Lilian herself was involved in the Women's Liberation Literature Collective in the early 1970s (7LIM/1/02). Campaigning groups also emerged such as Women in Media and Women in Publishing which also offered networking to those in the industry (6WIM and 6WIP). In November 1979, Lilian sought advice on marketing from the journalist Mary Stott (6OWP/14 folder 3). At this stage, *One Foot on the Mountain* had been reviewed in *The Guardian*, *Spare Rib* and *19 Magazine*, but not *The Observer*. 'The output of books is colossal' Mary warned Lilian and told her that commercial publishers usually sent hard-backed copies for review, something that might have been too costly for OWP. She suggested that Lilian study the newspapers and their writers carefully noting any open to feminist literature, such as Angela Phillips at *The Guardian*, who would be an obvious target. Mary told her Virago did well for reviews probably because Carmen Callil, one of the founders, built up a good range of contacts with the press when she worked for commercial publishing firms and was 'much liked'. Mary asked if Lilian could afford a simple 'at home' at their office when they were launching their next book. It might not necessarily result in helpful reviews, but it would make them known and ensure that when their next books arrive on writers' desks, they might remember them. Mary added a note by hand: 'ALWAYS send a copy to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Told librarians regard this as their bible, when ordering books'. *One Foot on the Mountain* was later reviewed by

Times Literary Supplement so Lilian took this advice. It was not until the 1990s that Lilian set up an advisory group, something Virago had from the 1970s, which included the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham (Riley, 73).

The archive shows precarious bookkeeping with notes scrawled on pieces of paper indicating where stock was located. One note dated December 1979 stated that 911 copies of *One Foot on the Mountain* had been sold and the rest of the print run was at bookshops or with Publications Distribution Cooperative, their distributor, with a note ‘this means we have virtually no copies left- a sell out in six months’ (6OWP/25 folder 1). Another page has the title ‘Income from the two grants – expenses to be added (or found!)’. Extra expenses were to cover poetry readings at various bookshops or poetry festivals – all necessary activities to promote the book but activities that had been overlooked in the initial funding applications and money now had to be acquired.

By January 1980, OWP had no copies of *One Foot on the Mountain*. Once more they suffered at the hands of external printers, this time BlackRose Press, a printing co-operative set up by anarchists (6OWP/25 folder 1). Such bad copies were produced that OWP returned them all. However, some of the copies printed by BlackRose were distributed with false rumours that OWP either could not pay the bill or took copies without paying. Distributing such copies was in breach of copyright. Lilian wanted friends to spread the word about the real situation as they did not have the money to take BlackRose to court. This shows what a vulnerable position OWP was in with no capital to cover such eventualities.

Early catalogues show that OWP was publishing novels, pamphlets and books of theoretical writing and poetry (6OWP/3 folder 4). Production costs for each title was found on a case-by-case basis. The Arts Council awarded £791 towards their first lesbian novel *Cactus* by Anna Wilson. This was the deficit for a print-run of 3000. Lilian also applied to the Greater London Arts Association and was awarded £400 – £200 towards publication of ‘Cactus’ and £200 in advance against loss with the understanding that this money would be repaid if there was no deficit (6OWP/14 folder 3). *Down There* by Sophie Laws, an illustrated self-examination guide, was the first in a series of planned health pamphlets. Another small grant was awarded by Leonard Cohen Trust of £200 to cover a loss on the pamphlet (6OWP/4 folder 1). In reality, the cost of production was much more and found through loans from friends and much free labour on the part of Lilian and others. OWP often experienced cash flow problems between production, distribution and recouping costs from sales. Paying royalties to authors, who requested them, was often delayed as OWP waited for money from distributors, and cash flow was severely

delayed when a distributor went bankrupt,⁹ owing the press a great deal of money (6OWP/25).

Milestone Year

1984 was a significant year for OWP as they made the decision to stop commercial printing and sold their small presses. For six years the printing had paid the rent and subsidized all the books they published. They now decided to go back to their original aim and devote all their energy and time into publishing women's words, but it was a hard decision to make. Lilian Mohin reflected: 'all that stringent blue-collar labour kept us from pomposity, I thought, but there are other ways to do that. I personally miss working in that way. Printing is an exacting and exciting skill and after 10 years I felt I was just beginning to get the hang of it. Nonetheless, those skills are very valuable to us in all the print buying and preparation for printing that goes into each book' (6OWP/4 folder 1). They also changed the blurb on the back of their books to read simply 'radical feminist and lesbian publishers'. Lilian explained: 'This is what we have always been, but in an increasingly conservative society it's clear we have to come further "out". Republishing *Cactus* seemed (another) especially good way to do just that' (6OWP/14 folder 3).

OWP catalogues for the mid-1980s offered a broad range of material. They were not interested in number of titles per year, as commercial printers were, but more interested in the messages they were publishing, and if a book seemed important (6OWP/4 folder 1). Many publications developed out of conferences or workshops that OWP organized such as *Breaching the Peace, Love Your Enemy?*, *Women against Violence against Women* and *Gossip*, a journal on lesbian ethics. These publications were intended as contributions to ongoing political discussions in the women's movement, contesting issues of the time, and often causing controversy.¹⁰ OWP also encouraged debate through poetry readings and popular 'Scribblers' Suppers', informal readings with food. They continued to add to their list annually publishing material they believed women wanted to read.

Lilian now submitted grant applications for much larger sums of money than she had ever done before. This was a trend which other radical presses pursued but it was a dangerous strategy, especially if there was no back-up fund, as it was difficult to predict how long this grant funding would continue. In 1987 OWP had its grant income significantly cut when the London Borough Grant Scheme, set up after the abolition of the Greater London Council the year before, ceased to fund publishers, and the London Borough of Camden also stopped payments because of its own

⁹ The Publications Distribution Co-operative went into liquidation in 1983 leaving debts of £11,042. See Delap ([this issue](#)).

¹⁰ Personal communication Anna Wilson.

financial crises (6OWP/9 folder 4). Lilian now applied to the Greater London Arts (GLA) for substantial grants. For the financial year 1988–89, OWP received £14,575 and a slight increase of £15,342 for 1989–90. Grant application forms provide lots of detail about what they planned to do. For 1988–89 the grant was to publish three issues of the journal *Gossip*, one novel, one anthology of Lesbian Separatism, three reprints and to cover the cost of six readings, six discussion meetings and to provide audio books. They hoped in 1989–90 to publish more titles, increase publicity and marketing, organize more events and diversify to include art reproductions and non-fiction such as literary criticism and lesbian feminist theology. They had prepared a business plan and had applied for a large overdraft from the bank, the first time they had done this. They had also applied for Arts Council Incentive funding towards production costs of new titles (£10,000 over three years). They estimated sales of £17,000 for one title. They were also going to start charging for events associated with book launches and intended to make more efficient use of freelance workers.

Applying for major grants brought many stipulations which OWP would have to meet such as quarterly reports, projected budgets, business plans and sending minutes of board meetings. Record-keeping is much better for this period because of the demands from funding bodies. In 1988 OWP appointed Andrew Nairn, an accountant of Hodgson Impey (6OWP/9 folder 1). The first thing that he wanted to do was sort out the 1987 financial statements and sent Lilian an exercise with precise instructions for carrying out a stock check. This was probably the first time that Lilian had conducted a proper stock check like this. There is no record of this stock check but there are the first official accounts for 1988 with detailed profit and loss account. From this, OWP received total grants of £36,678 in 1987 but this went down to £19,239 in 1988. Total wages were also being paid to directors Lilian and Anna Brawn of £16,942 in 1988. Total income for 1988 was £21,620 and total expenditure was worked out to £31,326 giving a loss of £9,706.

In February 1989, the letter from the GLA brought them good news of a grant of £15,200 and the bad news that the government was conducting a review of the arts funding system in England, taking in the Arts Council and Regional Arts Associations (6OWP/9 folder 4). In April 1990, the GLA awarded £14,000 to OWP on the understanding that they should have tighter and more effective marketing schedules, improve their financial stability and presentation of budgets and improve their equal opportunities policy.

As funding was starting to dwindle, Lilian established an advisory group of lesbians who were interested in the work of OWP. Invitation letters

mentioned OWP balancing on a 'razor's edge' between its spiritual and political aims and continued commercial survival (6OWP/2 folder 3). The group would consider the political relevance of what OWP did and the notes from these meetings offer valuable insights into the workings of OWP. In April 1990, Lilian said the 'worker' situation was awful and she wanted to consider what was most needed – an office junior, a publicity person, a serious administrator. There had also been a few discrepancies over the company's audit but Andrew Nairn was able to confirm 'my back-of-the-envelope figures' which probably shows how Lilian operated. In September 1990, one of the group suggested voluntary liquidation which shocked Lilian, who thought such a move unnecessary (6OWP/2 folder 5). Lilian reasoned that many British businesses were struggling and going into receivership because of interest rate rises and associated knock-on effects, and OWP was part of the same battle. But for her, there were differences. Operating a business was secondary; it was publishing to change the world that was important.

However, and interestingly, Lilian felt a 'loneliness', of being without a movement, which was OWP's worst problem. Her sense of isolation was exacerbated by the gradual withdrawal of other collective members, who increasingly believed that other forms of engagement were needed to progress their political aims.¹¹ Lilian remained convinced that any change of direction would threaten the integrity of OWP and undermine the principles on which it was founded. Lilian's vision was clear and she continued to run the press along the same lines, although new ideas were offered by the advisory group: OWP needed to restructure; to enlarge its creative base and increase sales by improving distribution. Lilian was well-aware that OWP was selling books to a converted audience and if there was any money it should be ploughed into advertising 'not as hype or promotion but simply to let more women know our books are available' (6OWP/4 folder 2). Lilian reflected that there was no profit, one of the very few references to this, because OWP books were cheap, margins were tiny and they only printed material that linked to their politics. To help improve sales, Lilian applied to the GLA for £15,000 to employ a marketing manager / director for a year and to pay towards promoting books in Europe, Canada and the US which at this time was limited.¹² This was a three-year pilot project which they hoped would increase overall sales by 15% in the first year and then an expected 20% over the following two years. GLA awarded them £8000 (6OWP/9 folder 4).

OWP was in a dire position as grants were drying-up and debts were increasing. The advisory group was full of ideas such as branching into academic publishing but it was unclear if this would improve OWP's plight. Mr Harbottle, Lilian's solicitor, whom she jokingly referred to as

11 Personal communication Anna Wilson.

12 At this stage, Onlywomen had financially limited contacts with European and North American lesbian feminist groups and publishers even though they had participated in all four of the biennial International Feminist Book fairs (London, Oslo, Montreal and Barcelona) since 1984.

.....

'the man in my life' (Lilian's underlining), suggested finding a rich lesbian rather than remortgaging her flat. In trying to raise capital, Lilian wanted to find more women who would agree to send regular donations. This would be a slow project and, instead, Lilian managed to raise a bank loan of £29,957 against the value of her flat in order to reduce bank interest charges.

In 1992, the London Arts Board (LAB) replaced the GLA, and its remit was more narrowly defined. It did award OWP a grant of £14,980, but it came with many conditions, such as attending 'board' meetings and being informed of overall structure and editorial policies. The LAB held three meetings with OWP during 1992 to review their application for the financial year 1993–1994. Their assessment review report detailed what a serious financial position OWP was in and how their business strategies were not realistic in the current economic climate (6OWP/10 folder 1). To start with, OWP's income was way below projected figures. By September 1992 they had sold £11,000 of stock, with £2,755 owed to them, which left a shortfall of £18,245 to hit their projected income by March 1993. The overdraft/loan of £24,000 was 50% of the company's overall annual projected income. OWP outlined how they would improve their financial position: increase direct sales at books fairs; publicize a new poetry prize; introduce a theatre series; emphasize its non-fiction (which was selling best); cut production margins; negotiate better deals with UK and US distributors; and find new premises with lower rent. LAB was not convinced that these measures would be adequate to turn the finances around. LAB thought the plan to increase OWP's non-fiction titles was well-judged but an area outside of its remit. However, the two non-fiction titles had to be postponed because of author ill-health and OWP now planned two new drama titles, one fiction title, a poetry collection and a revised edition of *Lesbian Ethics*.

Crisis Year

LAB felt unable to recommend OWP for revenue funding for 1993–1994. It gave several reasons for this decision, and if taken objectively, LAB was offering good advice, but it was probably not what Lilian wanted to hear. LAB believed that OWP's commitment to publishing books which fitted their politics overshadowed their judgement of what was financially viable (poetry and drama were very difficult genres to sell for example). OWP was also unclear about which titles they could promote well and sell, and what kind of list served their long-term aims. OWP offered no strategy to increase readership which was how the finances would have

improved. LAB's main objection concerned the high level of subsidy in relation to the amount of fiction sold and that OWP offered short-term solutions to problems rather than long-term plans to tackle serious underlying instability.

LAB's comments were hard-hitting and its decision to stop funding was an immense blow to OWP. Lilian responded first by asking people to write to LAB objecting to the news with the hope of changing it. A major fundraising campaign began and begging letters were sent out asking for monthly contributions by standing order in return for books and theatre ticket discounts, invitations to discussion meetings and launch parties. It is not clear how successful this was but there is evidence that Lilian received 42 one-off donations ranging from £5 to £2000 totalling £4285.55 in all during 1993–94 (6OWP/9 folder 6).

During early 1994, Lilian embarked on a new business plan to take to the bank, asking for £20,000 to expand the company's publishing programme. She employed Edwina Hughes of Eddy Ltd to prepare financial projections and give advice about the plan more generally. On Edwina's suggestion, Lilian made the language of the plan more 'bullish'. She also tried to supply figures so that Edwina could work out financial forecasts. She sent Edwina OWP's audit for 1992–93, commenting, 'although profit and loss accounting remains a mystery to me, I think the following figures show OWP made a loss of £6117'. (6OWP/9 folder 6). It's unclear from the archive what happened to this plan but, in February 1995, notes from an advisory meeting mention Chartwell House Corporate Services had nearly completed a business plan for £50,000.

Details of this new business plan are very similar to OWP's last application to LAB and show that OWP paid little attention to LAB's comments over their business strategy (6OWP/3 folder 1). In this new plan, OWP was going to produce 10 books a year and develop new lists – this time lesbian feminist crime novels and lesbian theatre. It was going to hold conferences and publish proceedings. New initiatives were to include market research questionnaires with mail order catalogues and administration was going to be streamlined with computerized systems linking book trade and mail order sales with royalty payments to provide a base for forward planning. Distribution agreements were going to be renegotiated and local publicists employed in North America. Lilian would edit and design the books and print and storage would be minimized by small print runs. Use of freelancers would provide cost effective services supplemented by unpaid volunteers.

The plan was sent to Barclays and the NatWest for their consideration and it was going to be offered to Lloyds. During this period of uncertainty,

Lilian noted that OWP's infrastructure was being eroded and decided not to go ahead with publishing 'Thin Ice' (6OWP/3 folder 1). In June 1995, NatWest rejected the application for finance because it did not believe that the levels of projected sales could be achieved (6OWP/9 folder 3). Chartwell House told Lilian to consider very carefully the number of books she thought could be sold, especially before she went ahead with the remortgage of her flat. This was a last resort but the only option left to Lilian. She now made an interest-free, long-term loan to the company. This meant that staff and overheads were drastically reduced as Lilian's home became OWP's office space from where she managed freelancers and trained newcomers to publish. Mention of financial difficulties are often cited in letters to authors, who hoped their books would be printed in the 1990s and delays were attributed to absence of time and finance, computer software problems, and much needed paid staff (6OWP/29 folder 5). There is also evidence that some authors paid for their books to be printed: Ann Menasche, author of *Leaving the Life*, gave an interest-free loan to be repaid (6OWP/20 folder 4); Pat Arrowsmith donated money for her publication *Many are Called* (6OWP/23 folder 1).

With the prospect of a £10,000 legacy, Lilian wrote a business plan with financial projections in 1997 to attract further potential investors and donors. Again, Lilian came up with 'new strategies': a new membership scheme with newsletter, mail-order discounts and special events, direct mail shots to solicit customers, and sponsorship through a matching scheme with businesses (6OWP/9 folder 3). It is unclear if this was successful but OWP catalogues for the late 1990s and 2000s do advertise special mail-order discounts, an 'artery' membership scheme and user survey (6OWP/3 folder 4). OWP continued to publish into the 2000s, with occasional Arts Council England funding. Their glossy catalogues gave the appearance of a thriving press, but it hung on a 'razor's edge'.

Conclusion

Book publishing is a complicated business and the story of OWP shows just how difficult this was if there are limited financial resources. OWP knew what it wanted to do but finding the money to do this proved extremely hard. OWP had no qualms about accepting grant funding and lunched from bid to bid, supplementing this with private loans and credit so that the vision could continue. OWP was often compared to other women's presses, such as Virago. Virago had serious financial backing and someone with business acumen who shared knowledge about banking and about how to secure loans.¹³ OWP was, of course,

13 For an analysis of Virago's access to male entrepreneurial knowledge see Withers 2019.

bound to fail in commercial terms when compared to Virago because OWP did not have the same backing, but that was not what mattered. What was important for OWP was to solicit, generate, encourage and publish writing by lesbian women and to challenge the status quo, whether it was through poetry, fiction, theory or polemic. Publishing the right message was paramount, not publishing for profit. Lilian, as managing director of OWP, was not interested in commercial success and tried to keep the press going on little money and sheer hard-work. She had the clear vision that women's words would 'change the world' and she kept this vision to the end.

Postscript

Shortly after I completed this article, I found out that Lilian had died. Although I had never met Lilian, I felt as though I 'knew' her through the archive. Lilian was a radical feminist lesbian who was a politically active campaigner. She believed wholeheartedly in the work of Only-women Press: giving lesbians a voice and publishing what lesbians would want to read. The archive tells this story – the highs and the lows.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works Cited

- The archive of Onlywomen Press (reference 6OWP) consists of administrative and financial papers, publication files, photographs and correspondence. It is held in the Women's Library at LSE. It also holds Lilian's archive (7LIM) and the records of Women in Media (6WIM) and Women in Publishing (6WIP).
- Cadman, Eileen, Gail Chester and Agnes Pivot (eds) (1981), *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors*, London: Minority Press Group Series No 4.
- Cholmeley, Jane (1991), 'Silver Moon Women's Bookshop', in Nanneke Redcliff and M. Thea Sinclair (eds), *Working Women: International Perspectives on Labour and Gender Ideology*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 213–32.
- Delap, Lucy (2021), 'Feminist Business Praxis and *Spare Rib* Magazine', *Women: A Cultural Review* 32:3–4.
- Jackson, Cath (1993), 'A Press of One's Own', *Trouble & Strife* 26, pp. 45–52.
- Riley, Catherine (2020), 'The Impact of the Women-Only Publishing Phenomenon on Early Second-Wave Feminism, Literature and Culture', in Laurel

- Forster and Joanne Hollows (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain 1940s-2000*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 67–82.
- Withers, D-M (2019), 'Enterprising Women: Independence, Finance and Virago Press, c.1976-93', *Twentieth-Century British History* 31: 4, pp. 479–502.