*Women and the Women's Movement
in Britain, 1914–1999*

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Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1999

Second Edition

MARTIN PUGH

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To the memory of
my mother
and my grandmother

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M.P.

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Preface to the Second Edition

'Women's history need not be confined to separate shelves. Its themes should inform not just the history of women but that of men too.'

Jane Rendall, *History* 75, 243, p. 72

The first edition of this book (1992) was written very much with this intention in mind. I aimed to examine the interaction between three overlapping spheres in twentieth-century British society: first, the organised women's movement, second the wider and less-politically involved female population, and third, the male-dominated political establishment. On the one hand, many conventional questions posed by historians cannot be tackled adequately without a recognition of the centrality of women's role; on the other hand, an evaluation of the evolution of the women's movement cannot progress satisfactorily in isolation from the forces and ideas surrounding it. In retrospect the chief themes pursued still seem to me to be valid and important: the successive generations among feminist activists, the apparent paradox presented by women's achievements after 1918 with the evidence of decline at the formal organisational level; the difficulties of working within the political system while maintaining a radical cutting edge; the significance of domesticity as a positive, not simply a negative, force in women's lives. I posed the question how far the year 1918 was a major turning-point both for the women's movement and in terms of its wider implications for British politics and society, and I suggested that historians had been reluctant to see the period as the 'age of women'. According to Cheryl Law this meant that I had 'dismissed the period'.¹ She, presumably, misunderstood, or else decided not to go on to read the book, since in many ways (and not only in this book but in other publications) I tend to take a rather positive view about the impact of women and feminism on wider changes and issues. But I also recognise that the relationship between any cause and the wider society is complex and sometimes elusive. It is comparatively easy, for example, to approach the institution of marriage by examining criticisms of it by feminists, but things become much more problematical when this is put in the context of the extraordinary (and unexplained?) popularity of marriage and motherhood among twentieth-century British women. It is also notorious that assessments of pressure groups and causes over short periods are highly misleading. To examine the women's movement from, say, 1919 to 1928 is to unearth a record of achievement and

growth; but this is to avoid the problems presented by the pattern of development during the subsequent decade.

Like most radical movements feminism presents long-term cycles of development; and this seems much more obvious from our perspective at the end of the century. I am therefore grateful to Jonathan Reeve for suggesting that I should extend the book by writing two new chapters. In looking at the emergence of Women's Liberation one is immediately struck by the importance of new generations within the movement; but on the other hand some familiar questions of tactics and of ideology seem to reappear in this period. Thus, the 1990s has seen a debate about the 'New Feminism' whose critics regard it as rather complacent and maternalist much as Eleanor Rathbone's opponents did in the 1920s; there is also currently a real dilemma over how far women should concentrate on exploiting their much higher profile within the parliamentary system and how far this implies succumbing to the fatal embrace of the British political Establishment with its legendary skill at smothering radicalism by adopting it. But to see the problems is not to be pessimistic. I have noticed that male authors of the women's movement are apt to attract criticism for not taking it seriously enough if they suggest the movement suffered from decline, weaknesses or divisions. This is scarcely reasonable; are historians to suspend the critical faculties they freely apply to the study of male organisations when they come to women's movements? With this in mind my chapters on Women's Liberation and Feminism in the Era of Thatcherism ought to be read with care. The argument is broadly that the apparently hostile climate of the last twenty years has been far less inimical to feminism than is generally assumed; even at its height Thatcherism proved unable to stem women's advances, and may even be said to have accelerated progress albeit unintentionally. Consequently the dilemmas facing the movement today are, in many ways, the dilemmas posed by success not by failure.