

**Katie Barclay interviews Leonore Davidoff, founding editor of *Gender & History*, September 2012.**

*KB : Today we're here to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Gender & History. I'm Katie Barclay, I'm a historian of Marriage & Family Life and I'm currently working in the area of the history of emotions at the University of Adelaide, and today I'm here to talk with one of the founding editors of Gender & History, to talk about the early years of the journal and what's happened since. So with me today is Leonore Davidoff, Leonore's had a very prestigious career – for .... well ... one of her biggest books has been Family Fortunes which has really completely changed the shape of the field. But more recently she has published Thicker than Blood a wonderful study of sibling relationships across the long nineteenth century. So, I think we shall get started.*

*So, Leonore, why did you found Gender & History?*

*LD : I think I have to give a bit of background to what was happening in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain, well also in other places as well. We had something ... an ad hoc group called the Feminists' History Group which had been started by, I think, a Canadian who was living in London. We met in pubs*

and rooms where we could find ... people talked about their own histories, we had nurses who came and talked about ... they were very interested in the history of nursing and so on. It was really around that group that I first became integrated into things related to my research, which was then on domestic service which was not of interest to formal historians. The other place of course was the 'History Workshop', not just the Journal, but the workshops themselves – Anna Davin and Barbara Taylor, Lyndal Roper, Anne Summers and many others and they were in touch in some ways with the Feminist History Group.

But many of us ... the other point to make, I think ... Is that many of us were marginal, we were marginal to formal history departments definitely. Many were in departments of education, I was in the sociology department and of course many, many were not ... like Sheila Robottham were not attached at all, they were in adult education, or freelance and so on. It was a period of ... this is well known ... of great political activism, but if you were, or I felt that if you had a full time job in a university some of the activists were a bit suspicious of us because you were 'inside' and you weren't as active as you could be, your ... your nose was in a book, you were stuck in the Library, that was the feeling. So that when the possibility of a Journal came about ... yes, it

would be an academic journal ... but we were very determined it would also be a different kind of academic journal, and again, I think 'History Workshop' was certainly an example of what we had hoped to do. So that's really the place where we were.

*KB : Great. How did you know it was the right thing? Was it just that political context or was there something that you thought here's a gap?*

LD : Well, (chuckling) I wish I had been as aware and sensible, but I have to admit it had really nothing to do with me. In 1986 I was approached by Sue Corbett, she was an editor at Blackwell in Oxford and she had been put in charge of a Women's History List and they had published several ... some very interesting volumes and collections, two of which were dedicated to me, by ex-students and colleagues and so on, and I think Sue Corbett must have picked up my name from that, and she, like Claire L'Enfant at Routledge, who was the editor who supported Catherine Hall and me for *Family Fortunes* – these women were wonderful. They haven't gotten the respect and the thanks that they should; within publishing companies, they made a stand for feminists' work and work on women, and in ... just around 1986 Sue Corbett had been promoted and put in charge of journals, and it was her idea, not mine, and

never to be forgotten, she asked to meet me at The British Museum for tea, and she said ‘I would like to start a journal and I would like you to edit it’ and we immediately had a discussion about what it would be and I said I would be very interested but I would not edit a journal on women’s history but only on gender in history. So we had a discussion about that and she agreed and she backed us all the way. So I am ..... I would like to take this opportunity to thank her.

Then, of course, there were all the practicalities; but going back to your question Katie, I think it was a good moment. The Feminist History Group had become more formalised, we had also organised something called The Women’s Research and Resources Council, where we had inter-disciplinary papers and so on, all run on a shoe-string, all deliberately with no university attachments, so the need for a forum, for more organised and wider ..... and being able to disseminate our idea more widely, because, by this time, at least about fifteen years of feminist activity & so on – and it had affected what people who were studying history wanted to do. We were very fortunate in that the Institute of Historical Research gave us free meeting space because that has always been a problem; so that was taken care of. And the next step was to get people involved and also to find a US contact. Sue Corbett and I both felt that it was really important to have a trans-Atlantic connection, clearly so much work

was being done by the Americans. The Berkshire Conferences had already OTEto the format that we have now. So, the first task was to set up what was called an editorial board – but we chose to call it a ‘collective’ to put our own emphasis on collective work, and I had to find a US editor. That was .... I took a real risk ... Nancy Hewitt who was not a well-known scholar, she was in the University of South Florida, young, but she had written really thoughtful articles on social history, criticising some of the ideas that were being put forward in women’s history but also very supportive. So I contacted her and she agreed. Looking back on the old Minutes I can see all the discussions we had about the ..... what the Journal would look like .... Keith McClelland .... we did have men on the collective – although this did raise questions - he was great, he went off and designed the typeface, what the cover would look like .... this was all starting from scratch ... and we had to have a title. Such long discussions about a title, and Sue Corbett, of course was very keen that we had a title ....we thought of all sorts of punchy things and Jane Rendall, I think, was the one who suggested .... what about ‘Separate Spheres’ .... because at the time some main-stream historians had focussed on this idea of separate spheres for men and women, and of course we were trying to deal with this concept and open it up and criticise it. So we sent this to Sue Corbett who took

it to a meeting at Blackwells, and it was received with laughter; they said it sounded too much like bosoms! (chuckles from both) So, that didn't work and in the end we came back to 'Gender & History' which seems to have worked perfectly well and in fact it's quite important because we're talking now about 1987 when we were preparing for the first issue and shortly after that the *Journal of Women's History* in the United States, and *Women's History Review* both started; their first issues were almost the same as ours and there was a very distinct difference between *Gender & History* and those two Journals. *The Journal of Women's History* would accept articles and material from men but not about men. *Women's History Review* did not publish anything about men and we were determined ... indeed the second issue had a forum on masculinity, and we decided we would have standard articles and then now and again forums and pieces about a specific themes.

When those two Journals were announced, we were a bit... certainly I was a bit taken aback, but before we started I had contacted the editors of *History Workshop Journal*, *Feminist Review* and *Australian Feminist Review* to discuss with them and I had a very generous letter from Clare Moses who was the founding editor of *Feminist Studies* saying 'yes' there was room for us all. So, keeping her generosity in mind I thought, you know, the more the better

and I think it has worked very well; and it's really important there are plenty of places.....

*KB : Tell us something about the early years – was it very exciting, was it a lot of work, what was happening? (Laughter).*

LD : It was both exciting and a lot of work. One of our problems was communication, especially with Nancy, and then she had drawn up a group of people as well because there was almost no ..... there was no internet, and e-mail had just begun by 1989 when the first issue came out but it was ... you had to write the e-mail over-night and then go and pick up these great print-outs from the computing centre, and very often things didn't get there and of course no attachments ... and everything had to be sent by post, and telephones ..... telephone was very .... was quite expensive. So..... the other problem was copyediting – we had no experience whatsoever, and no help and we had to copyedit everything ourselves and we didn't do it very well sometimes, and it was, er (chuckles) .... so it didn't look.... some of the early issues might not have been quite as we would have liked. And then another interesting .... which we hadn't thought about ..... development was that it turns out that the American contributors, and particularly the editors, the

Americans on their collective had a more formal approach and they wanted to see their articles come out in a particularly prescribed form, whereas we, very much on the British side wanted each writer to use their own voice and this was a constant .... It wasn't a terrible problem but it cropped up quite a lot and once in a while it provoked more problems. So that those were some of the .... And of course money was .... we had all sorts of ideas about fund-raising for extra things. We ran a series of seminars because we thought that at our meetings three times a year, people.... our collective in other words ..... didn't have the chance to talk about their own work, so we said..... for a while we ran seminars, separate from the meetings, when people could talk about their own work, their own interests and that helped to stimulate what we were looking for.

*KB : So, how did you get the articles for the first issue?*

LD : Well Sue Corbett said we had to have some well-known people, we absolutely had, and of course our aim was to publish graduate students and people on the margins of ..... we hoped people even outside academia and so on ... so, well because I am originally American I felt quite comfortable with the American scene. I went to several of the early Berkshire Conferences and



gave papers so I already had quite a large network of contacts there, and I just put pressure and begged Alice Kessler-Harris who was then a quite well known .... very well known American historian, to give us an article, and, bless her, she did; and Gisela Bock - then again we certainly wanted some European we didn't want just British .... So we had Gisela Bock. Which I thought ..... I had seen it as a paper and I thought it was stunning because it was stepping back and looking at what was going on. So that was the very first one, and then a piece from Yugoslavia where just making the point that you could barely do women's history in a society like that. So we tried to get as a wide a range as we could, and to satisfy Blackwell.

**\* See addendum added by LD below**

*KB : Interesting. So what happened after that? So you get your first paper ...you get your first volume out and all goes smoothly, or ..... and what about your own career? How long did you do the Journal for?*

LD : I think I stepped down in about 1994 .... no, no, or um, yes ... so from 1987 to 1994 when Keith took over. I stayed on the collective for quite a long .... for a long time, ten years after that, so I was still very involved but Nancy Hewitt only stayed about two or three years because she was building her own

career, and that made real problems. We almost lost the whole American connection and I remember the University of Virginia really wanted to take this Journal but I could see what they would do with it .... they would turn it into a straight academic journal and so ..... and that was quite difficult for me because we did not have much alternative, then finally Grey Osterud stepped in. Moved from California and used her connection to Radcliffe and the Schlesinger Library and that carried us through until then finally it settled down and went to Michigan and then to Minnesota you know, those people, those Americans who worked very hard for the Journal and they ..... they always made it very clear it was ..... Britain was the centre, this was why (door slammed over LD speaking) I didn't want it to go to Virginia. The British collective was where it was coming from, the Americans were allies and terribly important, but, they did it our way. (Chuckling) And so, you know, you have to hand it to them, but it worked and I must say that Sue Corbett many years later let us know that it was one of their most successful journals. We had..... because we were given a limit as to how many subscriptions we had to have before we could take any profit back and it seemed huge; I mean Library subscriptions and individual subscriptions and now of course it has gone way beyond that.

*KB : Amazing. I kind of want to take you back a bit to what we first discussed about the political context. Do you think the fact that feminism and the politics around feminism were so important at that point, made the Journal a success? Is its feminist politics what made people want to publish and want to read it? Is that been its kind of .... or do you think that Gender & History has grown in the universities beyond that and that is why it has become so successful?*

*LD : Certainly in the early days people were looking for something like that, particularly the concept of gender, and, don't forget that *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* hadn't begun, that was another area that we were publishing in which was struggling hard to be accepted. I mean people just have no idea what it was like in the 1970s. The history of sexuality was a taboo thing; there was one book that we could use in teaching called *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat* and that was it! So that, I think we appealed to the different constituencies – people who had a variety of agendas. In the 1970s you know, all these battles were going on, so I think that there was quite a wide constituency that we were appealing to. And also I think there was a group of students coming through – the first ones to be exposed to in their studies, coming through the system, they would be our core readership, and contributors, a lot of them.*

*KB : Interesting. The thing that has always struck me about Gender & History is how forward-looking it has been and so we look at the very first issue and you discuss issues like the development of women's history, masculinity in history, race studies, internationalism, and they've all went on to be massive subjects in the field of history more broadly beyond gender history and since then it has continued to do that, it has been big on material cultural studies for example, and the history of autobiography and subjectivity, it has really managed to keep itself as a leader. Do you have any sense of why that happened, why you were so good at seeing where things were going, seeing the future, or did you just set the trend?*

LD : A lot of it was the people – for instance Grey Osterud had a background in what the Americans call public history, such as open air museums and I was very keen to make contacts with .... and we had several other people on who were working in museums where of course material objects were central and was very keen, and in my own teaching I had discovered that there was just very little ..... I wanted to do something in a .... a discourse on gender divisions in the nineteenth century on costume because it's really important, but the history of costume was almost non-existent and where it was, it was

costumiers who did it; now, of course it has taken off; and the same with material objects. So we had .... On both sides of the Atlantic we had people with varying interests of their own who added to the mix and I think that's ..... Catherine Hall of course who had just ..... we had finished *Family Fortunes* and she was beginning to move into post-Colonial History and of course so she brought that in, and Jane Lewis and the history of social policy brought ... so each .... Keith McClelland and masculinity so they brought their interests and I think that's one of the reasons .... Well probably the main reason ... it is.....it's always people

*KB : Yes. So why do you think you attracted good people to the Journal?*

LD : Well I hope because of the Journal itself gives back and.... um... certainly up until the time I actually left the Journal, I was aware there were a lot of international contacts, people who read at various conferences, The European Social Science & History Conference – I had a lot of contacts on the Continent, I spent time in Australia where there were these groups of feminist historians who gathered together, and I hope and expect that this continued and that's one reason that carries the Journal along. How long it can be sustained I don't know

*KB : Hopefully for ever*

LD : I think very ..... it seems to me that very few people who worked for the Journal were on it just to forward their career. People gave so much commitment - who've never been really acknowledged or thanked - to help us, especially in those early days and we had so little help from Blackwells and so little money

*KB : So, looking back at Gender & History, what role do you think it played in your life and your career?*

LD : I learned to read much faster (laughter) No, aside from that, of course it opened up all sorts of fields and contacts. It was very, very important and I was one ... when I started in a very junior post in Essex which was already a suspect institution, and I was in the Sociology Department, so not the kind of 'in the centre' as you might say, and many, many of us at the beginning were junior, temporary, on temporary contracts, and as I said not particularly in history departments – very few women were in history departments and very, very few were in higher positions at that time, so *Gender & History* as the women's history community built within that, those people who were

particularly interested in gender not just because of Joan Scott's famous article which put it on the map, but because we had been working with ideas about power, about the relations of men and women and so on, and so that part of the women's history community it gave us a focus and I think much of that has remained. When one editor had to leave we did find other people who ..... and bit by bit younger people .... I always felt that was terribly important because the whole organisation will die if you don't make sure to recruit younger people, and I knew that they would have somewhat different interests and somewhat different outlook, but that's something you just accept. I am very pleased to know that it's ... it's gone on .... that kind of commitment despite what's happening to academic life – with it's pressure and long may it continue to do so.

*KB : Indeed. Well thank you very much for your time, that was really interesting, it gave us a really nice coverage of the early years of Gender & History and I hope that it will continue to go on with new fields, new countries, new people being involved over the next 25 or maybe even longer. Thank you.*

**\* Addendum added by LD:**

And from the start, our book review section was crucial to appealing to a wide readership. For many years, Jane Rendall as Book Review Editor, undertook this task where she included thematic reviews as well as of single books.