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History of the Woman's Building, circa 1975-1979

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Not that the Press hasn't had its difficulties. The collective began as a group of writers working to publish Women Unite!, a collection of Canadian social-feminist articles. The process of editing and writing took two years. No professional publisher would touch it without demanding more editorial control than the women were willing to give up. A small "Local Initiatives Program" grant later and Canada had a new women's publishing house. The Press has grown and developed over five years. But, despite the relative stability of the group in publishing terms, its financial position has always been somewhat precarious. From an optimistic leasing of the whole top floor of an old, converted Toronto mansion, the collective has been forced to condense its activities into three crowded rooms, subletting the rest of the floor. For the Press, however, the physical environment is less a concern than the social, collective process which goes on within it.

SOCIAL-FEMINIST PUBLISHING

Within the North American milieu of feminist publishing, the Canadian Women's Educational Press is relatively unique in its socialist-feminist perspective. As Brenda Roman, editor with the Press describes it, "We are not interested in helping women up the corporate ladder. Rather, we try to orient our publishing program to questions and issues affecting working-class women. In keeping with this perspective the Everywoman's Almanac 1978, a women's calendar, looks at the present economic crisis and how it particularly affects women. Also, the Press has two forthcoming books, Getting Organized: A Workers Guide to Building a Union, and Good Day Care: Getting It, Keeping It, Fighting For It. In the Past, the collective has published an anthology of women at work, a history of prairie women in Canada, and Population Target, a study of population control in the Third World from an anti-imperialist perspective. They've also printed a more theoretical approach to feminist issues in Marxism and Feminism, and several children's books. The process of publishing is regarded as a shared effort between the Press collective and the authors. Many people have illusions about Women's Press, however. Their relative success in the publishing field - twenty books in five years - has perhaps led to this problem. Because the Press has a business function, some people automatically distrust it. These misunderstandings can create tensions with people who expect a large financial return on their books, or a very large distribution. "But we're not in publishing to make money, and we don't really expect our writers to be either" says Brenda. The collective is very much a non-profit organization.

Distribution of books has been difficult in the past, though it is becoming easier. At first the Press was regarded by some bookstores as a fly-by-night operation. Its present production of four or five books a year has tended to correct that image. Over the past five years the Press has steadily increased its volume of sales and now has sales representation right across Canada as well as in the U.S. Large publishing firms, however, have larger amounts of capital with which to push and promote their books. The Press still counts very heavily on being part of the women's movement, on word-of-mouth advertising, and on good reviews.

Like most Canadian publishers, Women's Press gets grants from the Canada Council, and some from the Ontario Arts Council. But these grants are proportionate to the numbers of books published, and the total number of pages produced. This clearly favours the large publishers. Basically the books support the Women's Press and so far they don't do it well enough. The collective has discussed the possibility of trying to establish a contributions system, but have not yet ventured

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COLLECTIVITY IN WRITING, ORGANIZATION

The basic idea underlying Women's Press is its day-to-day collective operation. Unlike many organizations which call themselves collectives, but end up by returning to the hierarchical structure, Press members continuously work to maintain collective decisions, responsibilities, and work-sharing. There are eighteen members of the group including three on full salary and one part-time staffer. Many of the unpaid collective members spend time in the office, helping to maintain the ongoing functions of the publishing operation.

Manuscripts, both solicited and unsolicited, come into the Press and are assigned to one of the following committees: adult fiction, children's literature, or social issues. The committee members read the material, meet to discuss it with the authors and may propose to the collective as a whole that the book be developed for publication, usually with certain revisions. The editor meets frequently with the authors to help with the development of the manuscript. The collective work continues right up to the printing of the final manuscript.

This process is seen as necessary not only because most of the writers are full-time authors, but because Women's Press values the generation of collective research and writing as a political and social goal. Some of the books published by the Press are initiated by the collective members who determined the need for a particular type of book, and sought out the kind of women they thought could do it.

All the books published by the Press are produced by the staff in the Press office. This entails getting the copy ready for the printer. There are two staff people responsible for typesetting and layout, and a group of press members designs all the books. This practice is unusual for a publishing house and places a heavy responsibility on those few staff members involved in this aspect of Press work. By doing all the typesetting, layout, and design themselves, costs are cut and production process becomes part of the overall collective responsibility.

In an interview with the author, a Toronto feminist newspaper, the Women's Press summed up their impact at the end of five years of publishing. "As one of the few socialist feminist presses in North America, we feel a certain responsibility to keep raising some issues and issues that are not in the mainstream. A few women continue to make it in the big way, and some international women's work, those women have been focused on by the media out of proportion to their numbers. The fact is that the majority of women continue to be repressed and exploited in our system. Economically, women are in a more precarious situation than they've been for years. We feel that we can publish a wide variety of materials — and as all of these books confront what we see to be the primary reason for women's oppression."

Contact:
Canadian Women's Educational Press
280 Bloor St. W.
Toronto, Ontario

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COLLECTIVITY IN WRITING, ORGANIZATION

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