

D-M WITHERS. *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics: The Timely Business of Feminist Publishing*. Elements in Publishing and Book Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 75. £9.99 (paper).
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Following the landmark Sisterhood and After project, *The Business of Women's Words: Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing* is another extraordinarily fruitful partnership between scholars at the universities of Sussex and Cambridge and the British Library examining the history of the women's liberation movement. This project has been concerned in particular with new forms of feminist business practices in publishing. Such businesses, and the women who founded them, were motivated by values and beliefs more than profit and yet still subject to the constraints and demands of the marketplace they sought to subvert and transform. This collaboration has already resulted in the fantastic digital archive of the journal *Spare Rib* (now sadly unavailable owing to changes in relevant copyright law after Britain left the European Union) and a special edition of *Women: A Cultural Review* ("Purpose, Power and Profit in Feminist Publishing," 32, no. 3–4 [2021]). D-M Withers's *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics: The Timely Business of Feminist Publishing* is yet another impressive contribution to this scholarly output.

Features of Virago's history—the successes of titles like Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen* (1975) and Antonia White's *Frost in May* (1933, repr. by Virago in 1978), their iconic green spines, and the powerful personalities of the founders—have become heavily mythologized over the years. The strength of *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics* is that Withers has looked beyond these familiar features to tell a richer and more interesting story, grounded in the history of both publishing and feminism. Informed by Raphael Samuel's ideas about the relationship between past and present, Withers organizes the argument around three ways of thinking and feeling about the past: history, remembrance, and heritage.

The first chapter, "History," examines the emergence and development of the Virago Reprint Library. This series, which published influential texts such as *Life as We Have Known It* (edited by Margaret Llewellyn Davies, 1931; repr. 1975), *Round about a Pound a Week* (Maud Pember Reeves and Charlotte Wilson, 1913; repr. 1979), and *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (Women's Co-operative Guild, 1915, repr. 1978), sprang most directly from the women's liberation movement and its urgent search for a usable past. These titles were immediately popular, not only with feminists especially interested in uncovering working women's experiences, but also with teachers and students. Very quickly, however, this series was superseded by Virago's shift to fiction with the first Virago Modern Classics publications. In turn, this created some uneasiness among those who felt Virago was focusing too heavily on dead authors at the expense of the living: a criticism about which they felt rather defensive. Withers examines Virago's relationship with the women's liberation movement, reflecting the importance of women's history within contemporary feminism but also showing the tensions and different priorities that emerged at the press.

In the second chapter, "Remembrance," Withers considers Virago's relationship with cultures of commemoration, paying close attention to two books with contrasting fortunes: Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933; reissued by Virago 1978), and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918; reissued by Virago 1980). The success of *Testament of Youth* is now well known but was by no means inevitable. That success was due to the vision, persuasiveness, and business savviness of Carmen Calil, who promoted the idea of adaptation for television and negotiated a mass-market paperback deal with Fontana that complemented rather than superseded Virago's own sales. This achievement is in stark contrast to fate of *The Return of the Soldier*, perhaps in part because the latter was seen as a stranger and more difficult book, perceived by some feminist critics as problematic in its portrayal of class. Nevertheless, Withers

shows that Virago's success was a function of the increasing cultural influence of feminist ideas and its ability to tap into wider cultural trends.

This sense of Virago's importance as an actor in the marketplace, able to create and market, is reinforced in the final chapter, "Heritage." Here, Withers examines the aesthetics of the Virago Modern Classics series, showing that the publisher not only recovered but literally recovered women's writing, creating instantly recognizable and attractive books that were tremendously desirable as both objects and texts. Though Virago was clearly a radical feminist intervention, the company was also able to benefit from positioning itself as a heritage brand in a society in which heritage had increasing value. Interestingly, however, Virago's Victorian Classics series was less popular in the wake of Thatcherite appeals to Victorian values. Withers attributes this to the fact that it "potentially contradicted previously clear political messages about the recovery of women's literary heritage" (84).

This brief but intriguing book is not only a valuable contribution to the histories of publishing and of feminism but also a meditation on "the practice of timing and how timeliness is culturally constructed within discrete historical context" (2). Throughout, Withers reflects on the nature of time itself, considering notions of timeliness and being in and out of time. This framing is both an imaginative and productive way to examine Virago's history within a broader understanding about the meaning and place of the past in the present. Throughout, Withers considers how Virago was both an actor in and a beneficiary of changing trends in the marketplace and in broader British society and culture. Affordable and effective, *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics* will be useful both as a starting point for and a new perspective on Virago's impact and legacy.

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