

**‘I WAS ARRESTED AT GREENHAM IN
1962’: INVESTIGATING THE ORAL
NARRATIVES OF WOMEN IN THE
COMMITTEE OF 100**

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ABSTRACT

The Committee of 100 (1961- 68) was an anti- hierarchical group campaigning for British unilateral nuclear disarmament, using non-violent direct action. This article examines the oral narratives of six women involved in the campaign. It brings to light examples of women's activism at this time when there was a strong ideological bias towards them remaining in the domestic sphere and explores the gendered experiences within the group. The narratives reveal the individuality and originality of the Committee of 100, especially in comparison with their contemporary radical political groups and also the precursory effects of the group on the structure, ethos and method of later campaigns such as Women's Liberation and Greenham Common Peace Camp.

'I WAS ARRESTED AT GREENHAM IN 1962': INVESTIGATING THE ORAL NARRATIVES OF WOMEN IN THE COMMITTEE OF 100

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates six women's oral narratives concerning their involvement in the Committee of 100: a British mixed sex, anti-nuclear movement that campaigned using non-violent direct action from 1961-1968. My research brings to light women's activism in this period and examines gendered experience within the group, with special attention to meetings, actions and arrests. This paper also explores the importance and distinctiveness of this campaign by comparison with other political groups of the time and considers the influence of the Committee of 100 upon the structure, ethos and method of subsequent movements.

The Committee of 100 originated from a drive within the anti-nuclear movement to step away from the policies of The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which was committed to winning support from the Labour Party for unilateral disarmament.

Bertrand Russell (the president of CND) and a young American named Ralph Schoenman worked together to launch the new campaign.

Believing that the party political approach was futile, the Committee of 100's founders turned instead towards the Gandhian principals of non-violent direct action, which at that time were practiced by another anti-nuclear group known as the Direct Action Committee. The DAC,

although separate from CND, had members who were often involved in both organisations. They were a small group with strong links to Quakerism and the pacifist newspaper *Peace News*. The DAC's protests targeted air bases and they most famously organised the first march to Aldermaston in 1958 (before CND took the march over and turned it around to end in London). With civil disobedience high on the agenda the DAC began to draw attention to their campaign in a manner that troubled some of the political members of CND who were supportive of the Labour Party. 'The DAC was the heart and soul, or the thorn in the flesh, according to taste, of CND'.¹

This tension culminated in a split within CND, with Bertrand Russell resigning as President in 1960. The Committee of 100 proposed mass civil disobedience in resisting nuclear weapons, challenging the authorities to 'fill the jails', with the intention of causing prison overload and large-scale disorder. It was an anti-hierarchical organisation, committed to non-violence, and on arrest members would go limp so as to create maximum disruption without conflict. Most of the DAC became involved and eventually ceased to exist as a separate group.² The idea behind the Committee of 100 was that with such a large campaign core of over 100 members, the authorities would be prevented from prosecuting individuals for their part in organising actions. Many of the people recruited for the Committee of 100 were famous names, actors, playwrights and musicians and this helped to attract the media and consequently public attention. By procuring

pledges of support in the weeks leading up to actions, the campaign gained publicity and secured a crowd. The largest action was on 17 September 1961, when an estimated 12,000 people defied the powers of control and sat down in Trafalgar Square; 1,314 people were arrested.³

The Committee of 100's campaign lasted for approximately seven years, a relatively short time for a movement of such mass interest. With so many people eager to get involved, local Committee of 100 groups were soon set up all over the UK, and as public support grew, the police became more heavy-handed and the courts less tolerant. The original idea that an absence of leaders would prevent individuals from being singled out proved to be misguided, as did the notion that 'filling the jails' would cause political chaos. The police, in fact, decided who and when they would arrest and the 'Wethersfield Six' took the brunt with harsh sentences of 18 months each for the five men and 12 months for Helen Allegranza.⁴ This more punitive approach by the authorities was intended to deter further support for direct action and was successful to a degree, but the most dedicated protesters continued and many were arrested time and time again. There were successes for the activists (certainly in raising awareness), not least with the 'Spies for Peace' scandal, when official secrets concerning government plans for nuclear war were leaked to the press and distributed on the 1963 Aldermaston March. A major investigation ensued but no arrests were made.⁵ The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 aroused some disillusionment within the anti-nuclear movement on the presumption that the

demonstrations had no influence on actual government decisions. This, with the placating effects of the Partial Test Ban Treaty, caused a decline in the campaign; many people in due course switched their efforts to other concerns such as community politics, housing campaigns and the anti- Vietnam War movement. The Committee of 100 began to lose its following and by 1968 it had dissolved.⁶

INTERVIEWING WOMEN

The absence of women in historical documentation has been exposed and challenged in the years since Second Wave Feminism. Feminist historian Dale Spender has addressed this exclusion by tracking down and interviewing women to record their feminist roles in quiet times. 'I understood that by not seeking them out we had contributed to their invisibility, that we had played a role in the denial of women's existence and strength'.⁷ The post- war years (1945- 1959) are identified as quiet times in relation to women's activism and have been referred to as the 'Nadir of British Feminism'.⁸ The setting up of the Welfare State and the economic opportunities that it entailed supposedly had a soporific effect on women's activism; many felt that the fight had already been won. In addition, the collaborative influence of the popular press and sociological and psychological research concerned with juvenile delinquency gave rise to a prevailing ideal of femininity and domesticity. Women were made to feel that staying at home was not only good for their families but also for themselves and, in effect, the

wider society.⁹ But these attitudes were not shared by all women and there were many who committed themselves to campaigns for feminism and peace. Feminist historian Jill Liddington's *The Long Road To Greenham Common* (1989) traces the relationship between these two aspects of women's activism back to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ By providing an overview of this period, her remarkable book points to neglected areas of women's history and motivated me to investigate women in the Committee of 100.

In researching the Committee of 100 I encountered very little written about the group. Previous work tended to include the group within studies concerning CND and I found no evidence of attention to the gendered experience within either campaign.¹¹ I decided to search for women who had been active members of the Committee of 100, firstly to illuminate their hidden stories as women activists and secondly to bring to light their experiences within a mixed group, on the basis that gender dynamics might be revealed to a greater extent in a woman's narrative than in a man's.¹² I interviewed six women who were born between 1923 and 1943. Jo, Jay, Marion, Diana, Barbara and Ruth are all white and middle class, but they had very different backgrounds ranging from progressive commune living to suburban conservatism. Their parents' attitudes towards their involvement in the campaign were equally diverse. The women's motives for joining the Committee of 100 were based on a strong personal sense of moral outrage, a

feeling of political impotence due to the voting system and a fear of nuclear war.¹³

Feminist oral history recognises the importance of addressing issues involved in the interview relationship such as ethics, power and agency.¹⁴ I am a white woman from a working-class background with strong sympathies for both feminist politics and the peace movement. I am in my mid thirties and so am younger than the interviewees. Five of the women were educated to at least degree level and the other is a published writer; this I believe, gave them an insight into the interview situation in which they all seemed very comfortable. There were no obvious power inequalities and frequently the interviewees would guide the narrative to their own area of interest.

Concerning ethics, it is important to note that these women are recounting events that were often illegal and were certainly considered at the time to be subversive. The Cold War created an environment of mistrust, especially between the authorities and left wing, anarchist or pacifist groups. This, combined with a determination to raise awareness through their unlawful actions, put the Committee of 100 members in a situation where they were seriously risking their liberty. Forty years on, recording illegal action might still be risky, especially when the interviewees are recounting events that they were never arrested for and as a researcher I had to progress with caution. Cold War anti-communist propaganda however, is now widely acknowledged and non-violent direct action is a common form of protest. Perhaps in this

contemporary context the activities of these six women would be widely regarded as both courageous and applaudable, just as direct actions of the Suffragettes have been accepted, in retrospect.

STRUCTURE AND ETHOS

By the beginning of the 1960s a rising tide of thought most evident in British student politics and left wing groups, echoed overseas developments such as the Civil Rights Movement in the US and Anti-Apartheid in South Africa. The appearance of New Left, anarchist, Trotskyite and peace groups reflected a new 'social sensibility' with 'the pre-eminence of youth, and a chain of political and social reactions against the rigid conventions of everyday life that were to culminate in the politics of liberation'.¹⁵

Jay recalls this emergent air of contention with a feminist slant:

Well when I was at college I was thinking about everything as one does and I very much objected to the fact that people weren't allowed to use birth control, it was illegal. And you weren't allowed to have abortions. That was illegal. And you weren't allowed to divorce, and homosexuality was prohibited [...] And in the early sixties I was questioning all this and saying, 'why shouldn't people have the right to make their own minds up what their own morals are'.¹⁶

This period, when women were being ideologically persuaded to remain in the home, poses intriguingly complex dilemmas for young women

with a political agenda. Becoming involved in political pressure groups was a greater leap from convention than for men, and within many of these new groups, gender dynamics were by no means based on equality.

The feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham recalls from her own experience of left wing student groups at the time that women's issues were continually excluded from the agenda,¹⁷ and it has been widely argued that the frustration which stemmed from such misogyny was one of the factors that gave rise to the Women's Liberation Movement.¹⁸ Stuart Hall, a founding member of the New Left Movement, has since reflected upon this apparently implicit disregard for gender concerns: 'We were totally unconscious of questions of gender, totally entombed on that issue, even though we were beginning to think about personal life, even though we realised the boundaries of politics had to be ruptured to bring in those aspects of life seen as important to people'.¹⁹ The notion that Second Wave Feminism was partly a reaction to these gender inequalities is, to some extent, a compelling argument. Many left wing groups were based on male-dominated hierarchical committees with strict agendas and pedantic constitutions where women were especially restricted. What these women in the Committee of 100 reveal, however, is that they were part of a more inclusive campaign drawing on a diversity of political influences with the common aim of opposing government policy on nuclear weapons. Women's issues were still absent from the agenda, but this organisation differed greatly from

other radical political groups in structure and ethos thus creating a more egalitarian environment for political activism by women as well as men.

The Committee of 100 established itself on the principals of anti-hierarchy and consensus, and in meetings members would sit in a circle, each with the same authority to speak. Like the DAC, they maintained links with the pacifist newspaper *Peace News* and it is clear that much of their structure and ethos reflect a strong Quaker influence. A wide range of political thought derived from a diverse membership that included communists, humanists and pacifists, and there was also a strong anarchist element that emphasised the need for personal responsibility and the right to individual opinion. This unique organisation created a much more equal environment for the women involved. Marion reflects upon how the group's innovative structure and ethos were necessary precursors to later movements:

The prerequisites were embryonic in the Committee of 100 for discussing things. The old hierarchies weren't there [...] You know maybe the kind of men in the Committee of 100 were challenging, without even thinking about it, authority in a different way themselves. So the prerequisites were in the Committee of 100, not in the far left groups, not in a lot of those Trot groups which were really male dominated, where the women had a hard time. A lot of them left and joined the Women's Liberation Movement.²⁰

The idea that the men involved in the Committee of 100 were different from men in other left wing groups is an intriguing point and raises a question for possible future research. It can be seen however, that gendered discrimination for women in the group was less extreme than in other radical campaigns of the time and, as Diana points out, women within the Committee of 100 were treated better than in society as a whole:

I actually left school with a higher degree of assumption about equality because of my schooling than I would have done perhaps coming from a single sex school or perhaps a more conventional background [...] To an extent it felt like the natural thing and what quite often felt unnatural was then after that getting involved in other things like the blues and music scene and being completely gob-smacked by the attitudes of both the men and the women. So that was quite a late kind of awareness, but I can of course look at the Committee and look at all sorts of things that you know one could say were not brilliant but it was a heck of a lot better than anywhere else outside I think.²¹

The Committee of 100's original and more equal organisation managed, even without explicitly attending to issues of gender, to avoid some of the tensions and frustrations that bubbled up in the New Left groups.

The anti-hierarchical ethos permeated the group principally in structure and also in individual self-image. Members understood that decisions were based on consensus and good will, which created a

reassuring awareness of support for personal opinion. Within this innovative campaign there did exist a residue of old- left bureaucracy and yet as Ruth explains, this was circumvented without necessarily being challenged:

Quite interestingly, in the Committee of 100 there were some men, I can only think of men, I can't think of any women who loved having a constitution, who loved these little bits of paper [...] There were some of these men who were an absolute pain. But there was kind of this underground network within the Committee of 100, which took no notice of them (laughter).²²

This step from bureaucracy to co- operation was groundbreaking for a political group in this post war period. Quaker style meetings and an underlying sense of personal responsibility within the campaign set it apart from other groups and created an air of classless and communal self- belief that would go on to influence future organisations. Diana argues:

It was effective in bringing into play ways of campaigning that then went on to have enormous effects [...] and a kind of attitude of grass roots democracy and decision making which have become much more endemic through a variety of political movements now. I'm not saying that it was the only thing that would have caused that, but the Committee certainly has its role in terms of developing those ways of working in the whole kind of Libertarian Peace Movement over the years. So that was important, and the effect on individuals was important. I still

consider it very much the touchstone of how I started to think for myself.²³

This belief that the Committee of 100 pioneered a new way of organising was evident across the interviews. The women felt that the group had made a good attempt at being inclusive and fair and some of them found themselves fully involved on all levels with little thought given to gender preconceptions or inequalities. Jay, for example, was extremely confident in this environment, as she had already cut her teeth in the more gender divided trade union movement.

I was heavily involved in all the activities; strikes and campaigns for better pay; annual conference delegate, branch secretary and so on, which was a useful experience. I learnt public speaking that way.²⁴

The Committee of 100 in comparison held few obstacles for her personally, and any discrimination that might have filtered into the group was dismissed or surmounted.

Some of my interviewees did, however, recall a lingering sense of intimidation resting on gender and it is very important to be aware that some apparent inequalities still did exist within the campaign. Diana recalls how she would often communicate her views through her boyfriend, as she was uncomfortable to express herself in meetings :

I would quite often sit in a meeting and I would be sat on the floor besides Charlie and I would want to say something and I would quite often mutter it to him and he would then say it, but

it might be considered quite sensible even, and so good old Charlie had said it, and I hadn't.²⁵

Marion who was working at *Peace News*, would also often impart her views through other people:

I did sometimes talk through people in the office. It's maybe a way that women got heard in those days. I didn't have the confidence or courage to stand up in a meeting.²⁶

Perhaps these women were shy and gender inequality was less important than personality, but their experience does suggest that even women in the Committee of 100 were influenced by powerful conditioning about women's roles. They explain how they later did gain confidence, especially with the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement. Jo makes this point:

I didn't have any confidence in speaking out loud until we went through this feminist thing in the early seventies, when we got together with our neighbours and talked. We had these consciousness-raising things, after that I lost my shyness and I felt able to speak up.²⁷

These women needed to learn how to be assertive in a comfortable environment where they felt both themselves and issues of gender were taken seriously. For them, the Committee of 100, even with such great egalitarian efforts, failed to provide this comfort and support. Gender was not in itself considered an issue, as the anti-hierarchical ethos and structure of the Committee of 100 was thought to be sufficient in promoting equality between members.

On the other hand, women in the Committee of 100 did gain from observing the more powerful women in the group. Diana describes how she regarded such women and the effects they had on her:

I can look back and think of women who in retrospect were much more significant to me in terms of how they were...after becoming involved in the Women's Movement, looking back and thinking 'gosh, there were some really strong and effective women', and I must have seen some things that rubbed off hopefully, even if it may have taken a little while.²⁸

For Marion it wasn't the men that made her uneasy. Strong, influential and educated women within the group caused her to regret that she hadn't gone to university:

I remember at the time thinking, I've disadvantaged myself here [...] I didn't know what they were talking about in terms of concepts and theories [...] I knew what I felt was right and wrong, but I suddenly began to feel quite naïve and that didn't matter so much with the men because they almost expected it.²⁹

This feeling of inadequacy in comparison with the more confident women is quite understandable. This was a period in which most women (certainly those without a public school or university education) were socially expected to express a certain kind of femininity, to be motherly and domestically minded. To be anything else might appear audacious or eccentric and this was enhanced by a scarcity of socially positive images of strong women.³⁰ Whether or not the Committee of

100 members intended it, there was some percolation of these wider social rules into the group and it took a very determined individual to work against them. Women did at times figure as prominent members, particularly those who were more highly educated, eloquent and self-confident, all of which at the time were viewed as predominantly male qualities. Although Diana didn't class herself as one of the stronger women she did identify with them in not aspiring to the conventional view of femininity: 'I would have thought of myself as an honorary man.... There was that kind of, either you're behaving like a man or you're this kind of trodden-on person'.³¹ What becomes clear is that within the Committee of 100, because of its original structure and ethos, women's views if expressed were attended to, and yet they were better received if delivered in a characteristically male tone. Institutions of authority; such as the government, the workplace, education and the media, were dominated by men, and women who ventured into such domains had to participate in the customary manner. Those with less confidence to enter the debate watched and learnt from these women and were a little more prepared for the arrival of a new wave of feminism.

The Women's Liberation Movement arrived at the end of the sixties on a tide of protests campaigns. Like the Committee of 100, it was based on a structure of consensus and anti-hierarchy and although second wave feminists were often rejecting many of the methods found in radical political groups of the 1960s, it is likely that they picked up on some

organisational ideas along the way. Marion saw the individuality of the Committee of 100 as having a fundamental influence on the formation of the new movement :

I remember actually saying that in a Women's Liberation meeting and everyone said 'Oh so I suppose the blokes started that off as well then'. Oh no, no, but in fact I think developments do happen like that ³²

Second Wave Feminism hinged on a rejection of patriarchy and a focus on issues that were concerned with women's personal liberation. A common assumption within the movement was that it was a political, ideological cutting edge. This meant that feminists tended to ignore their influences of preceding movements and consequently there was little interest in ideas of historical continuity. Many rejected the previous generation's activism as old-fashioned and ineffective especially if they were male led and bureaucratic. Those who explained the origins of Women's Liberation as being partly a rejection of misogyny within the New Left, were often writing from personal experience.³³ What has not been acknowledged until now, is the experience of women from the Committee of 100 who became feminists, as at the time they were not encouraged to express any views concerning similarities and crossovers. It did not fit with the new revolutionary code.

When the Greenham Peace Camp began in the early eighties the full force of this new feminism found a place of focus. For a great many women, the fundamental debates of second wave feminism such as the patriarchal emasculation of women, the politics of reproduction and issues of male sexual and domestic violence created an atmosphere in which women were eager for change and action.³⁴ Greenham Common Peace Camp, especially when it became women only, attracted women who were hoping to express this feminist theory, challenge the identities imposed upon them by patriarchy and to work politically and ideologically with women without the dominating influence of men.³⁵ This new explosive campaign in the Women's Peace Movement provided a perfect environment for them. Greenham women once again had little knowledge or interest in earlier male dominated movements that had by then 'fallen from vogue'.³⁶ Sasha Roseneil's *Disarming Patriarchy* (1995) is an exceptional piece of research that uses oral narratives to examine the experiences of women at Greenham Common Peace Camp. Roseneil shows how the structure and ethos of Greenham Camp as an organisation, had clearly been highly influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement and once again meetings were anti-hierarchical, based on consensus, and personal responsibility and opinion were encouraged.³⁷ At the time however, it was important for both Women's Liberation and Greenham Peace Camp women to distance themselves from what they considered to be earlier patriarchal campaigns. In doing so they were failing to acknowledge any influences or effects a group such as the Committee of 100 may have had on their formation.

ACTIONS AND ARRESTS

The Committee of 100's campaign strategy of non-violent direct action aimed to dramatically raise the profile of the nuclear threat. For its short duration, it was a high profile campaign, achieving considerable media attention and raising public awareness. It was not only the 'Spies for Peace' episode that attracted mass interest. Bertrand Russell's jail sentence in September 1961 was reported world-wide, and there was huge coverage of the Wethersfield trial when Pat Pottle, representing himself, managed to get Air Commodore Magill to admit that, under orders, he would 'press the button' he knew would 'annihilate millions of people'.³⁸ Media interest was often negative but it did push the Committee of 100's protests to the foreground. Jay recalls her reasons for joining: 'I felt CND was holding back the anti-nuclear movement because they were trying to be respectable and establishment all the time'.³⁹ This belief was evident across the interviews and looking back, none of the women saw any alternative to direct action. Committee of 100 group discussions were often politicising, unifying and based on a strong sense of moral outrage with justification for direct action. Marion refers to a particular talk that was a pivotal moment for her. A fellow member was saying:

'If we just go on marching Aldermaston, it's almost becoming an institution. Next minute it'll be like a fun fair. If we go on doing that nothing's going to change. We're just going to have to

challenge the state and the only way we can do that is by mass civil disobedience', and that made a lot of sense to me. If you want change you're going to have to fight for it.⁴⁰

This line of reasoning was well acknowledged inside the Committee of 100 and the level of commitment was very high.

Actions undertaken by my six interviewees ranged from passively sitting down with a mass of people, to being manhandled by police and imprisoned under the Official Secrets Act. Their courage, conviction and willingness to sacrifice their liberty is extraordinary, especially in the early 1960s, when women were encouraged to remain at home.

Throughout the interviews, similar forms of actions were repeatedly mentioned and it soon became evident that these women were dedicating a great deal of their time to the cause. The demonstrations most frequently referred to were the Aldermaston marches, the major London 'sit downs' and Embassy demonstrations (American, Russian and Greek), a protest in the House of Commons, a convoy to protest in Greece, a demonstration in London against the Queen of Greece and numerous air base invasions.⁴¹ For Jay the commitment was absolute; 'I was on every demo there was and I was arrested every time there was arrests'.⁴² This enthusiasm was apparent in all six narratives although they were not all arrested to that extent. Sometimes the women tried to be arrested but without success. Jo recalls taking part in an early Committee of 100 'sit down':

Bertrand Russell sat on the Air Ministry steps and we all sat down on the pavement. But I didn't actually get arrested. They just sort of picked me up and told me to go home. It was very disappointing.⁴³

There were many opportunities to get detained and occasionally special courts would be set up to deal with a large number of arrests. Barbara recalls an incident in such a court:

Within a couple of hours of the demo I was in front of the magistrate you see and he said 'I have a list here of your earlier convictions'. This was the first I realised about modern technology, how they'd got the database you know. This is going back some and I was amazed he had and he read out a list as long as your arm, all of which I was proud of you know. I've never been caught for anything I might not have been proud of and he said; 'Is that all correct?' And I said; 'Well, if you've got it there it must be' (laughter).⁴⁴

This pride in arrests and the 'fill the jails' attitude was beginning to unsettle the authorities who decided to take a more serious line. Before long, the police became more severe when arresting and women along with the men were roughly treated. Jay remembers an incident when the Committee of 100 invaded the Greek Embassy with the intention of setting up 'Radio Free Greece':

After about two hours the police broke down the barricades and got in and they were pretty violent. They rushed upstairs and smashed the radio and they wanted my camera, and they twisted

my arm very painfully, nearly broke it trying to get hold of the camera. So I had to let go and then they exposed the film, quite unnecessary. They were really violent in the way they took people out and arrested us.⁴⁵

Fines and sentences also became heavier as the authorities attempted to clamp down on the movement. The protesters, undeterred were increasingly aware of the risks that they were taking. Barbara saw this harsh approach taken by the authorities as evidence of a success both for herself and the campaign:

I think that it did give the authorities something to think about. My room was bugged I've discovered. The device was actually found and I've been told by somebody, who worked at the civil service that there was a pink dossier on me, which apparently means highly subversive, but it then became dormant (laughter) so I'm nobody now.⁴⁶

It is clear that the activists were determined, self-sacrificing and proud of it. Out of the six interviewees, three of them served custodial sentences and they were all arrested more than once. There is evidence that men were given slightly longer sentences for their involvement and yet the experience of Holloway for the women was an extremely tough ordeal.⁴⁷ The Committee of 100 failed to bring about unilateral disarmament and indeed to remove the nuclear threat, but there are three main points that have emerged from these women's narratives showing the strengths of the campaign. It raised the profile of the nuclear debate to a level that the wider anti-nuclear campaign was not

achieving, it set a precedent for a new way of campaigning and it also showed people that they could make a stand for what they believed in. Non-violent direct action had now entered the accepted repertoire of dissent.

Just as the structure and ethos of the Committee of 100 may have influenced women in subsequent political activism in the Women's Liberation Movement and Greenham, its direct action campaigning was also an important, if neglected, legacy. The use of non-violent direct action has been the chosen campaign method for many movements in the years since the Committee of 100. From the highly publicised actions of members of the Women's Liberation movement during the 1970 Miss World demonstration,⁴⁸ to the hunt saboteurs and anti-war sit-down demonstrations of more recent years. It is now a much recognised and widely used method of protest. In looking at the origins of Greenham, Sasha Roseneil (1995) refers to the Committee of 100. 'The DAC and the Committee of 100's stress on the responsibility of individuals to oppose nuclear weapons and their opposition to the parliamentarian 'Labour-path' strategy of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), were precursors of Greenham's ethos and mode of action in the 1980s'.⁴⁹ Had this link between the Committee of 100 and Greenham been made in the early years of the Peace Camp, it would almost certainly have been met with bewilderment or even scorn.⁵⁰ By the 1980s the debate concerning military violence was fundamentally connected with domestic and sexual violence. The presentation of

gender disparities confirmed men as detrimental to the campaign. It is not surprising in this context, that feminist peace activists did not want to be reminded of earlier male-dominated movements that had lost favour, and so the fact that women had been involved in similar actions a generation before was ignored. Nevertheless, with the exclusion of the camp's women-only status, the combination of factors on which Greenham was based, such as an emphasis on anti-nuclear protest at an air base, non-violent direct action, consensus and anti-hierarchy, all greatly resembled those factors on which the Committee of 100 itself was founded twenty years before.

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All six of my interviewees visited Greenham Common Peace Camp for the big demonstrations, but none of them stayed there or indeed considered themselves to be part of the camp. Diana was a little more involved, as by then she was working for CND who assisted on the large-scale actions.⁵¹ She had been arrested at Greenham back in 1962 for invading the air base and found the whole new campaign rather frustrating:

The trouble was you see that every Greenham Woman that I met, one had to pretend that one had only just found out about nuclear weapons and Peace issues and indeed quite possibly even feminism [...] I felt deeply kind of unnerved by the idea that you couldn't talk about anything that had happened before [...] I was basically saying 'this thing that is happening now is part of a continuing tradition' and what I personally encountered was a

fixed gimlet stare and 'I don't want to know' [...] I might get really arsey and say 'oh yes I was arrested at Greenham in 1962'.⁵²

This denial of her past was an infuriating experience. Diana had dedicated much of the previous twenty years to anti-nuclear campaigns and feminism, and had been strongly involved in a 'Feminism and Non-violence group'; an organisation she saw as having made Greenham possible. It was very important to her to establish that there was a continuum in the relationship between women and peace and yet all her experience was ignored in the context of a campaign that saw itself as completely innovative. Greenham was indeed revolutionary, most fundamentally for its women-only status, and perhaps at the time it was necessary for those involved to see it as such, to break the ties with all that went before. The sensation of being part of something groundbreaking may well have added to the momentum of Greenham, thus any attempt at the time to place it in the historical context of the Peace Movement met with resistance. It is, perhaps, easier to make this connection in hindsight.

REMEMBERING POLITICAL ACTIVISM: THE CHALLENGE OF ORAL HISTORY

The Committee of 100 was a remarkable and innovative group that is often forgotten today. When it is referred to, it is usually included as a sub division of the larger CND or subsumed within the many left wing movements of the early sixties. It has certainly not been given the

historical attention or recognition it deserves and its influences upon later women's and peace activism has been rejected. Likewise, the omission of gendered experience within such movements requires amendment and the stories of women activists from these quiet times need to be recorded. This article aims to be a step in that direction and demonstrates the value of oral history interviewing. These women's narratives have raised many new questions and opened up areas of future study. My project did not have the resources or scope for a representative sample of interviewees, and even with additional resources such a sample might have been impossible to achieve; for one thing it was not easy to find interviewees. I do not believe, however, that the small sample detracts from this research as it generated rich qualitative data that illustrate individuals' experiences within the area of study. Hypotheses are generated from small-scale research that can then be evaluated with a more representative sample at a later date. The oral history method has enabled us to research the experiences of people that might otherwise be ignored, making history more democratic.

Oral history method is not without critics. Memory is regarded by some as an unreliable historical source because it is '...distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past'.⁵³ Each of these factors is relevant and indeed oral historians have conscientiously examined them all in

turn, borrowing guidelines from other disciplines and adopting extreme caution in their analysis. Furthermore, oral historians now regard memory as more than just a catalogue of truth and fact, it is much more of a personal interpretation of events, and an analysis of how people make sense of their memories can shed significant light on an individual's past. It is necessary to bear these points in mind when examining narratives and to be aware of any factors that would affect the way an individual composes their story.

The women I interviewed are recounting a time in their lives that was hugely important to them and they are telling their stories forty years on when they have little concern about recrimination or investigation. There is a powerful common voice coming from the interviews in both accounts and interpretations, with a strong sense of eagerness to present the significance of their campaign, and to dispel any ideas that they had failed or indeed wasted their time. As a researcher, I am aware of a great responsibility to put this point across and this is made easy by being very much convinced of it myself. Jo Stanley's examination of Communist and Labour Movement auto/biographies points to silences that are evidently down to a personal and political loyalty that she sees as having come from following a strong party line.⁵⁴ Investigating these accounts of women in the Committee of 100, I am struck by the many similarities between them, and this is especially interesting as they have such diverse backgrounds, perspectives and identities. Although they shared many common ideas and attitudes, there was no strict party line

within the group, as personal opinion and responsibility were fundamental to the Committee of 100's underlying ethos. They do reveal at times that there were disagreements within the Committee of 100, even between the women I interviewed, and yet these are never expanded upon.⁵⁵ The interviewees were very quick to explain that any conflicts or personality clashes are long resolved and that overall they have come to understand each other in maturity. The six women were mostly familiar with each other, even though they might not have met in over thirty years, and there was evidence of a great deal of mutual respect and indeed from this, a certain amount of loyalty. It would be interesting to interview these women further to more closely examine any struggles within the Committee of 100, and indeed to interview men who were involved. These women's rich comparable narratives come from distinct memories of fundamentally important times in their lives however, and they might not wish to blight their accounts with what they now see as trivial contentions. From their differing positions they reflect on a successful coming together of people acting on moral outrage and attempting to express this very personal protest in a fair and mutually responsible manner. Barbara reflects:

The Committee of 100 really gave us an insight into politics and everything else. I think it was the most important, it only lasted for, you know just a very short time, but it was the most important thing in life for a large number of people. We all say so. Everybody who was active in the Committee of 100 says that was the time, you know?⁵⁶

The relevance of this campaign for those involved and for subsequent movements is clearly of great importance and the process of interviewing these women and listening to their narratives has been enlightening, and is a significant step towards filling the gaps in women's history.

- ¹ Christopher Driver, *The Disarmers. A Study in Protest*, Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1964, p 35.
- ² A detailed account of the events concerning the formation of the Committee of 100 can be found in Driver, 1964, pp 112- 116 and a comprehensive and concise 'Diary Against the Bomb' which lists all the main actions and events in the Committee of 100's existence can be found in Peace News Pamphlet, *From Protest to Resistance*, Peace News, 1981.
- ³ Richard Taylor and Colin Pritchard, *The Protest Makers*, Pergamon Press, 1980, p 11.
- ⁴ The Wethersfield Six were arrested and made an example of for their part in organising an air base protest. Helen Allegranza objected in court to being given a lesser sentence than the men. Prison sadly proved too much for her and on her release she committed suicide. See Michael Randle and Pat Pottle, *The Blake Escape. How we freed George Blake and why*, Harrap Books Limited, 1989, p 31.
- ⁵ Driver, 1964, p 149.
- ⁶ Taylor and Pritchard, 1980, pp 13- 14.
- ⁷ Dale Spender, *There's Always Been A Women's Peace Movement This Century*. Pandora: London, 1983, p 6.
- ⁸ See Martin Pugh, *The Nadir of British Feminism? 1945- 1959*. Macmillon: London.
- ⁹ For a good discussion of the expectations of women at this time, especially John Bowlby's theory of 'maternal depravation' see John Muncie et al (eds), *Understanding the Family*, Sage Publications: In Association with the Open University, 1997, p 47
- ¹⁰ Jill Liddington, *The Long Road To Greenham Common*, Virago, 1989.
- ¹¹ See for example Frank Parkin, *Middle Class Activism*, Manchester University Press, 1968. and Taylor and Pritchard, 1987.
- ¹² For a sound case for focusing on women's life stories and gendered experience see The Personal Narratives Group. *Interpreting Women's Lives*. Indian University Press, 1989.
- ¹³ These are themes that have emerged from the interviews.
- ¹⁴ See Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*, Routledge, 1991.
- ¹⁵ Liz Heron (ed), *Truth, Dare, Promise. Girls growing up in the Fifties*. Virago, 1985, Introduction.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Jay Ginn, born in Harrogate, 1939; recorded by author, 20 August 2002.
- ¹⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, *Threads Through Time. Writings on History and Autobiography*, Penguin, 1999, pp 75- 77
- ¹⁸ For a list of such references see Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*, Open University Press, 1995, p20.
- ¹⁹ Rowena Chapman and Jonathon Rutherford (eds), *Male Order- Unwrapping Masculinity*, Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1989, p 91.

- ²⁰ Interview with Marion Prince, born in Hertfordshire, 1942; recorded by the author, 5 November 2002.
- ²¹ Interview with Diana Shelley, born in London, 1943; recorded by author, 10 October 2002.
- ²² Interview with Ruth Walter, born in London, 1942; recorded by author, 3 October 2002.
- ²³ Interview with Diana Shelley.
- ²⁴ Interview with Jay Ginn.
- ²⁵ Interview with Diana Shelley.
- ²⁶ Interview with Marion Prince.
- ²⁷ Interview with Jo Foster, born in Buckinghamshire, 1942; recorded by author, 10 October 2002.
- ²⁸ Interview with Diana Shelley.
- ²⁹ Interview with Marion Prince.
- ³⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise. Women in Postwar Britain 1945- 1968*, Tavistock, 1980, p 39.
- ³¹ Interview with Diana Shelley.
- ³² Interview with Marion Prince.
- ³³ Sheila Rowbotham, 1999.
- ³⁴ See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, Hart- Davis, 1971. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of sex*, The Women's Press, 1971 and Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, The Women's Press, 1981.
- ³⁵ From February 1982 men were asked to leave the camp.
- ³⁶ Jill Liddington, 1989, p3.
- ³⁷ See Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy*, Open University Press, 1995.
- ³⁸ An excerpt from the trial's court transcript can be found in Peace News Pamphlet, *From Protest to Resistance*, 1981.
- ³⁹ Interview with Jay Ginn.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Marion Prince.
- ⁴¹ See Peace News Pamphlet, 1981.
- ⁴² Interview with Jay Ginn.
- ⁴³ Interview with Jo Foster.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Barbara Smoker, born in London, 1923; recorded by author, 27 September 2002.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Jay Ginn.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Barbara Smoker.
- ⁴⁷ This can be argued by looking at the experiences of the Wethersfield Six. See Randle and Pottle, 1989, p 31.
- ⁴⁸ Women's Liberation protesters threw flour bombs during the proceedings.
- ⁴⁹ Sasha Roseneil, 1995, p20.
- ⁵⁰ Jill Liddington, 1989, p 3.
- ⁵¹ Diana had joined CND in 1980 after they had passed a motion agreeing with non- violent direct action.
- ⁵² Interview with Diana Shelley.

⁵³ Alistair Thomson, *Fifty years on: An International Perspective on Oral History*, *The Journal of American History*, September, 1999, p 584.

⁵⁴ Jo Stanley, *Including the feelings: Personal political testimony and self disclosure*, *Oral History*, Spring, 1996, *Political Lives*, pp 60- 68.

⁵⁵ Diana mentioned disliking Jay at the time for being 'upfront and stroppy', both are qualities which she now admires in her.

⁵⁶ Interview with Barbara Smoker.