

A RADICALESBIAN HERSTORY

By Chris Sitka

PREFACE

The following is an account of the beginnings of lesbian feminism in Australia. It is primarily the story of the first National Lesbian Feminist Conference ever held in Australia which took place near Melbourne at a place called Sorrento on July 6 - 8th in 1973.

The paper describes the formation of the group which initiated and organised that gathering; the Radicalesbians. It goes on to relate the events which occurred at the conference itself and then to the longer term impact and the post conference activities of the Radicalesbians.

The Radicalesbians grew in influence and size and then declined and dispersed into the general Women's Liberation Movement. It was decades before activist lesbians once again sought to organise a conference for themselves outside of coalitions with heterosexual feminists and gay men. An original version of this paper was prepared and presented for the first of these; the 1989 Adelaide National Lesbian Conference.

This history is based on the recollections of the author, oral history collected from seven of the original members of the Radicalesbians, letters outlining recollections from five others and a number of surviving documents saved by the author and a few collected from libraries, archives and other women politically active in the 1970s who contributed material.

It is written as an oral history which includes the experiences, recollections and analysis of the author. The bulk of the reminiscences come from tapes recorded in 1988 by two groups of Radicalesbians 'old girls'. Jenny, Di, Sue and Jocelyn got together in Melbourne, and Sharon, Lyndel and myself gathered to record our memories in Sydney. The quotes from these discussions were so good they are used verbatim throughout. Though recorded 15 years later the language is a surprising reflection of the flavour of the times - as if the participants regressed through the excitement of their reminiscing.

Throughout the history first names only are used. This is because a number of these women fear public exposure as lesbians. Though some may agree to have their full names used this has not been done in the interests of consistency. For the purposes of research I have a full list of all participants in the conference whose names could be remembered. There are forty on this list.

This use of first names only is poignantly reminiscent of the radical feminist custom of the early 1970s of using only first names, using group names or refusing to sign publications at all. It was an expression of the then highly valued principle of collectivity. The message was considered to be much more important to acknowledge than the messenger. In the spirit of the time activists

were not seeking recognition and fame as individuals. To promote oneself in any way to stand out above the crowd was considered grossly individualistic and counter revolutionary. To evoke copyright on radical tracts was an unforgivable bourgeois crime.

The consequence is that it is now difficult to identify who were members of organisations, who wrote particular papers, leaflets and produced other publications. For example a collection of radical feminist writings produced at the time by the Radicalesbians appeared with no list of who worked on the issue, let alone a named editor. None of the contributors used surnames and many used fictitious first names.

The knowledge of who produced this and the many other publications depends entirely on the memories of those involved at the time. In the research for this herstory it became obvious how these memories are fading and sometimes faulty. When participants in the taped group discussions were trying to remember who went to the Sorrento conference there was an instance where there was a lively discussion about whether a particular woman had been present at Sorrento or not. It was finally concluded that she hadn't, yet photos later retrieved showed that she in fact had been there.

All the Radicalesbians I contacted, including those quoted here, claimed they couldn't remember anything of importance. Most couldn't even recall for sure what year the Sorrento Conference was held. It was held 21 years ago and is an important part of feminist history in this country.

Though most of the participants in the political dramas of the time are still involved in working for social change, sometimes as 'femocrats' in institutions they originated, the 1970s is reaching a mythical stage as the values of Women's Liberation, have been replaced by feminist pragmatism. The original dreams became jaded, yet most of those who dreamed those dreams have not given up the struggle. The explosive anger of youth has transmuted with time into a plodding determination to keep peeling back the layers, one by one.

The Radicalesbians were inspired by emotions like those expressed in Robin Morgan's poem *Monster*:

"I want a women's revolution like a lover.
I lust for it, I want so much this freedom,
this end to struggle and fear and lies
we all exhale, that I could die just
with the passionate uttering of that desire."

The Radicalesbians were quintessential Women's Liberationists. Their story is an important and illustrative one. Due to lack of resources this is not an exhaustive and complete examination. Tracing everyone would be a major project, however it does contain accurate first hand accounts and conveys the flavour of the time for those who weren't there and those who were but need

reminding.

To the young women of today, these were the ideals and aspirations of those who laid the foundation for your own flight to freedom.

INTRODUCTION

This is the herstory of the first National Lesbian Conference in Australia. It was held near Melbourne, at a place called Sorrento in July 1973. The National Radicalesbian Conference of Sorrento was a major milestone in the development of lesbian politics in this country. Its influence is still apparent today, as this paper will show.

Sorrento saw an exhilarating gathering of, what was to us then, the rather phenomenal number of over 60 lesbians from around Australia. Most of us came from Melbourne - but there were women from Adelaide, Canberra, Sydney and the countryside.

It has been pointed out to me by a Western Australian woman that it was not a truly national gathering because women from W.A. were not included. No-one from Tasmania, Queensland, N.T. turned up either. However this was by default rather than intent. We sent out notices and invitations to all the appropriate places such as Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation centres.

At the time there were no specifically lesbian feminist groups existing in Australia. There were certainly many lesbians active in Women's Liberation and in Gay Liberation but they were yet to organise separately.

Though the representation and numbers of women attending may not seem so great now, the Sorrento Conference was none-the-less of great significance. For the first time, in Australia, political - feminist lesbians were getting together to define what a lesbian is, what she could be and what we could do about it. We were grounding a whole new culture. One that had not existed before. One that we now live within.

I decided originally to write this herstory for the National Lesbian Feminist Conference held in Adelaide in January 1989. I believe that the Adelaide Conference was the first national, avowedly lesbian, conference since Sorrento. Fifteen and a half years on.

No one I contacted could remember any specific lesbian conference, or even gathering in the interim. Though they were sure there must have been one, or more. There have been lots of conferences and gatherings in the intervening years at which lesbians have got together. One woman, in answer to my queries, wrote and said: "No, there wasn't a separate conference but because there were so many national conferences of one sort or another it seemed that we had regular opportunities to discuss the politics of lesbian-feminism."

The many other gatherings, though they might have been made up almost exclusively of lesbians,

were called women's gatherings, conferences or whatever. I may be wrong about this. But if so I would've expected at least one of the many women who I contacted, who have been active since 1973, to have remembered it.

There have, of course, been lesbians meeting under the auspices of national gay conferences. But this, to me, is a different process to what Sorrento and Adelaide were about.

There is one other possible exception I would like to record. A group of Sydney lesbians formed a group called either Radicalesbians &/or Lesbian Liberation in late 1973. They organised a Radical Feminist Lesbian Conference which was held at Minto in early December '73. I have been able to find out very little about what went on there. As far as I can tell it was purely a Sydney conference, and so, not a national one. Certainly no ex-Melbourne Radicalesbian I have spoken to remembers going to it. Though several women do remember a Women's Liberation cultural festival we all went to at a similar stage, which was at Minto.

As Jenny says in her remembrances of Sorrento:

"I think it's really interesting that it never started a tradition. It was such a great conference."

This account will first look at the background which led to the Sorrento Lesbian Conference, the events of the conference itself and then the on going consequences of the conference.

THE BACKGROUND

Before describing the Radicalesbian Conference itself I think it is important to put it in its context. To establish where the Radicalesbians came from and what sort of activities they were involved in.

The Radicalesbian group came into being in early 1973 only a few months before the conference. The general political climate of the time was of revolutionary fervour. Vast demonstrations were common and Melbourne had recently seen regular anti-Vietnam moratoriums of up to 100,000 people. Many of us had been involved in those as well as violent anti-apartheid demonstrations during the infamous South African Springbok's rugby tour. Anti-imperialism, black power and destruction of the military-industrial complex were the rallying cries of the left and especially of radical youth. We were well used to far ranging criticism of and action against what was popularly known as 'The System'.

It was out of the ferment of the National Liberation Armies and Black Liberation movement, etc. that both Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation emerged. There was something called the Sexual Revolution happening at the same time. It was becoming cool to fuck who and when and where you wanted to. All the established institutions of society were being challenged, if not broken down.

Some of the revolutionary fervour was dying down a bit by the early 1970s. People had bashed

their heads hard against the brick wall of the capitalist system - and were getting concussion. It seemed the wall was not going to topple over. So everyone began figuring out how to dismantle it brick by brick.

Women began to look closer to home for the sources of oppression. They saw that in the organisations of the left, the men were acting out the very oppressions they claimed to be fighting. They were acting them out against women. And against gay people.

So the new wave of feminism, the Women's Liberation Movement was born. The Gay Liberation Movement was formed from a similar awareness of how the mechanisms of oppression have their source in our personal lives.

Not all the Melbourne Radicalesbians had been active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, the left, or even necessarily Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation. All the same it was from this background that the group emerged. Public opinion was a different thing in 1973 to what it had been a few years earlier.

Radicalesbians came into being at a time when it was still a completely novel idea to 'come out' (be publicly visible). This was a concept which was pioneered by Gay Liberation. Lesbianism was still thought of by many, perhaps even by most, lesbians themselves as an unnatural perversion - an illness from which they suffered. Lesbians often weren't even aware that other lesbians existed. It was much more common to keep one's lesbianism firmly hidden.

It is this context that the Radicalesbian Conference and the papers presented at it, such as 'Turning the Fan Around', in which the author affirms lesbianism and debunks the myths about lesbians, should be seen. It was written at the end of an era when the heterosexual nuclear family mythology had been particularly strong. When even single mothers were still considered to be terribly shameful and 'de facto' heterosexual relationships were commonly hidden to an extent unimaginable today.

Heterosexual feminists were reconsidering their sexuality, gay women were getting pissed off about the sexism of gay men, and lesbians in Women's Liberation were still hesitant about revealing themselves there. The need for something new to pull those threads together was lurking beneath the surface.

Di expressed this in her memories; "I view the Sorrento conference primarily in the context of everything else that was happening at that point in time - you can't isolate it from being 1973, and it being a time in the midst of a whole lot of other things that were informing our politics; including the anti-Vietnam moratoriums, general feminist stuff coming particularly from America at that stage, student movements, gay lib and black liberation. (Though we had no contact with Aboriginal women at the time.) The black power stuff was very much informing our feminist approach to women's power. It was a very particular historical point in time that brought us

together to want to celebrate being lesbians ...

“It was very personal - we were celebrating the notion of the personal being political. Which was a great awakening for me. It was a great notion that for the first time in my life brought together a whole lot of disparate parts of myself into one, and made sense of them, and made them more than just the individual.

“But alongside that really personal stuff there was a very broad social perspective. In the midst of which were set my feelings of celebrating the power we felt of being lesbians.”

THE GAY WOMEN’S GROUP

In a more direct way the Radicalesbians were an off-shoot of the Gay Women’s Group which had come into existence within Gay Liberation. Originally women within Gay Liberation were not separate at all, meetings and functions included both men and women. However feminism was infiltrating its consciousness into Gay Liberation and the women were becoming dissatisfied.

Gay Liberation had rented a house to organise from. I remember the location of the Gay Liberation Centre in Davis Street Carlton because when I was trying to make my first contact with lesbians I rode my bike up and down the street, hoping to stumble across some lesbian to talk to, but there was never anyone there much. I finally managed to make contact at a Gay Liberation information table at Melbourne University during orientation week.

Jocelyn remembers the start of the clash between feminist lesbians and gay men. It started at a Gay Liberation meeting: “There were about five of us. It was at Davis Street (the location of the Gay Liberation Centre). We were very annoyed ... I can’t remember what it was. It was generally the sexism of the men.”

Sue remembers an incident in which; “The women had tried to get into the Davis St. Centre one night and a bloke called Bill was actually in there fucking with some other bloke and wouldn’t let the women in. This just seemed to typify in women’s minds the poor behaviour of the men, their general sexism and so on.”

Jocelyn went along to a women’s meeting at Melbourne University. “It was a truly amazing meeting. Jocelyn spoke up about this thing and then women dotted round the room all leapt in. Suddenly this whole barrage against the sexism of the men in Gay Liberation sprang up.” (Sue)

So the women formed a Gay Women’s Group which met at the Gay Liberation Centre. “The first meeting afterwards I think there were six or eight women.” (Jocelyn) There were some women who didn’t feel good about meeting separately from the men and argued against it. The group grew slowly for a while.

Jocelyn describes the gay men’s reaction to the Gay Women’s Group:

“I remember how they started flapping round once we organised separately. It caused great alarm. And they, as men generally do after women’s meetings, kept wanting to know what went on and what was said about them and all that sort of thing. So we had a sense of power.”

Once the group was formed a slow integration began. Women started coming from the Women’s Movement as well as through Gay Liberation. “There was a merging went on. It hadn’t had a specifically feminist focus necessarily at the start.” (Sue) The women had split from the men more because they were pissed off with them rather than because they aimed to work for more specifically feminist goals.

Then at one memorable meeting three very influential women, newly arrived back in Australia from England, joined the group. Jenny, Kerry and Robina had a formidable presence which made a strong impression on the existing members. They had a couple of idiosyncrasies such as always saying “Yeah. Right.” So that soon became a characteristic speech pattern of ours. The other one was of calling everyone ‘Sister’. It became very ‘in’ to call each other ‘sister’ rather than by name. Like “Would you like a cup of tea sister?” or “This sister needs a lift to the meeting.”

Jenny explains; “We’d been sitting in London reading books. So we came with our theory in that kind of marvelous, way-ahead ethereal state that is born of no practice whatsoever, except in our own little household, which really had not been typical of our world.”

They were very eloquent about their feminist theories and I remember being somewhat intimidated, if fascinated by them. Though they seemed supremely confident to us Jenny reveals;

“The first Gay Women’s Group meeting I went to - we’d done all this theory and blah blah. We’d got it together and it was all great and so on. But I remember seeing two women in the street outside and I thought ‘My God! Lesbians!’ and I was terrified. Even though you couldn’t find friendlier faces. But I saw them as monsters. Like in the film *Lianna*, when she goes to the gay dance and at first all the faces look scary and later they look wonderful. That’s how I felt at the time. There was a lot of that to get over.”

It was at this stage that we started debating who we were more aligned with, Women’s Liberation or Gay Liberation, though we still had a way to go before we seceded. We were still measuring ourselves in other ways.

“There was that whole idea, largely flippant, but with an undertone of some sort of consideration of an issue in it, of wanting to set up a beat and deciding that the stretch of Rae Street between Jocelyn’s and Barb’s places would become a beat. The rumour was a couple of women took it seriously.”(Sue)

“I think a couple of women claimed they went and only met each other. That was interesting because there was still a lot of confusion about how much we took over the values of the Gay

Movement at that stage.”(Jocelyn) We were starting to talk more about what lesbian sexuality could be. This kept developing as a topic.

Meanwhile we were interacting a bit with non-political lesbians, though not very successfully. “The bar dykes thought we were too scruffy by half.”(Sue) The interesting thing was that there wasn’t much of a pub scene in Melbourne. In the late 1960s and early 70s there were no women only pubs.

Jocelyn remembers this dearth of venues for lesbians. Once she tried going to a coffee shop which she’d heard was a lesbian hang out. She took a straight friend for moral support. “We sat there all night and nobody spoke to us. We couldn’t see anyone there who looked like a lesbian. As we were going somebody was heard to whisper - ‘They must be lesbians.’ I felt so frustrated.”

Sue says; “I remember going to the Dover hotel on Friday night gay nights. They were mixed gay - but all the lesbians were very role identified - we were as much shunning that as anything else.”

Then there was Society Five which had only the mildest political profile. I think, it was mostly about providing a place for gays to meet. “You walked up 17 flights of dark stairs, knocked on the door, said something like ‘Radclyff sent me’. It was very closeted.” (Sue)

There was also an organisation called CAMP - which stood for Campaign Against Moral Persecution. It was more of a reform group. Working mainly for law reform to legalise homosexuality. As revolution was on our agenda we didn’t think much of them - and they didn’t think much of us; giving homosexuals a bad name.

ADELAIDE

In Adelaide there was more a tradition of women’s pubs, for some reason. The feminist lesbians seemed to form a stronger link with the bar dyke scene.

“There wasn’t what you would call a radical lesbian group in Adelaide. Adelaide was very much a mixture of women who were feminists and the lesbian issues within that had only in a minor way begun to surface at the end of ‘72 start of ‘73.

“I was living with about six other women in a feminist collective, which was two houses next door to each other. Only one or two women actually identified as lesbians and so it was a gradual process - this group of women I lived with coming to some kind of recognition that we might be lesbians.

“In Adelaide the dyke scene outside of the women’s movement hadn’t formalised itself into being a discussion group. It was a pub scene. Their initial response to feminist lesbians was great suspicion; “Are you really lesbians? If you’re not, what on earth are you doing mucking around in this scene. If there’s any way of you not being lesbians why would you choose to if you had

any other choices?" - their advice was much more; if you do have other choices get out of here. Don't hang around with us lot."(Di)

The Adelaide pub scene was very working class. So political lesbians "introduced a different way of even talking about lesbians which was quite alien."(Di)

Adelaide also had a Gay Liberation Movement. They hosted the first National Gay Liberation Conference in early 1973. Together with another woman called Di, I flew over to that as Melbourne Gay Women's Group Representatives. We came back exclaiming about how we had met some wonderful Adelaide women. The other women in Melbourne just had to meet these Adelaide lesbians. It provided an impetus to organise a conference where we could meet them. The discussion became "We need to be in contact with other lesbian women, there's other women, not just in Melbourne, but across the states." (Sharon)

RADICALESBIANS

Around this time a lot of big changes were happening in the Gay Women's Group. We were starting to realign ourselves and re-name ourselves.

"There was this big meeting at Davis Street where we discussed this whole issue - whether we were aligned with the Women's Movement but still had a role in the Gay Movement." (Sue)

Around that time we also organised a big, controversial and significant discussion at one of the regular Women's Liberation general meetings. We had more or less demanded a discussion on lesbianism, which was not a topic Women's Liberation had openly faced until then. It is remembered as being a very tense meeting. The lesbians were feeling unaccepted and the heterosexual women were feeling threatened at having their prejudices confronted. Something must have been resolved because after that we started meeting in the Women's Centre.

We began discussing the Radicalesbian Manifesto, a publication from New York. We were being influenced a lot by the articles and papers which were coming out of American and especially from these New York lesbians.

"One of the hot topics which resulted partly from reading them, was whether lesbian was just a term of abuse and so we should leave it, or whether we should reclaim it - and we went in that direction." (Sue)

We made an actual decision to use the word lesbian rather than camp, gay or woman-identified-woman to describe ourselves at that point. We also chose Radicalesbian as distinct from Radical Feminist because we wanted to identify ourselves positively as lesbians.

"It was a sort of cross over between the two Movements (Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation) which was reflected in the term Radicalesbians; also a sense of being outside both and having to

teach both.”(Sue)

Coming out was a strong imperative in those days. Radicalesbian was about the most ‘out’ and outrageous name we could confront our various oppressors with. Unlike gay you can’t really pretend it means anything else.

ORGANISING THE CONFERENCE

How did the Radicalesbian Conference get organised in the first place?

“I think we were just sitting around one day and decided it would be good to have a conference.”(Sue) There was a desire to expand our field of communication. To get together with women from other states. To have a concentrated discussion in a live-in type situation.

We sent out a roneoed letter to women throughout Australia announcing the conference and asking them to reply - within a week would you mind. We were in a big hurry in those days. However we had a bit of trouble finding a venue and had to postpone the planned date for two weeks. Eventually we settled on the Whitehall Guesthouse in Sorrento.

Sorrento is a seaside holiday resort on the Mornington Peninsular, about 50 miles south of Melbourne. It is a rather conservative place - one you think of as one of the strongholds of ‘the family’. In the middle of winter it is very sleepy. We booked the Guesthouse under false pretences - saying we were ‘a woman’s group’. Not very false. They must have been quite pleased, thinking they’d make a winter windfall. Little did they know exactly what the wind was blowing in.

Once we booked the venue we sent out another letter advising women that the conference dates had been moved from late June to July 6th-8th. It let them know all the arrangements. (The full cost of the weekend’s accommodation with all meals provided was \$14.50!) The letter also promised a couple of papers (on Lesbians and Revolution and Sexism in the Women’s Movement) which never appeared according to our recollections.

The two letters we sent out are a good example of the then current enthusiastic use of the word ‘sister.’ They also included a map with the exact location of the Whitehall Guesthouse in the main street of Sorrento. However should you decide to pop down and peruse the now Herstorical Site, perhaps even put up a memorial plaque, I advise you to read about our departure from there before you approach the manager or any of the locals.

So the scene was set, the stage was ready. It remained only for us to work frantically on our papers, as I am doing now, and transport ourselves and the sisters from interstate down to the scene of the drama.

THE RADICALESBIAN CONFERENCE SORRENTO

Everyone I contacted who was at Sorrento remembers it as one of the high points in their lives. Probably the high point in their political lives. We were over the moon - impassioned by our cause. The feeling was more one of a festival or celebration than a conference, even though a lot of hard, intense talking and thrashing out went on. It was controversial and even heavy at times.

There were lesbians there who thought we were a bit over the top and being ridiculous, but that didn't seem to affect the atmosphere. Probably they too were high on the combined presence of over sixty self-aware, self-congratulatory women celebrating their lesbianism. We had the feeling that this was a first. That there'd never been such a coming together before. It was a confirmation that lesbians were everywhere, were proud, were changing our lives. We were growing in numbers and awareness and we were unstoppable.

"My memory is that it was just so energising and so extraordinary to be with women from other states who were all feeling happy to be lesbians. That in itself was a really important part of the gathering - that we were still celebrating finding ourselves." (Di)

ARRIVAL

The participants arrived in a variety of modes. Some lesbians flew from interstate, others caught the train. Three women hitch-hiked together from Adelaide. Two women drove all the way from Adelaide, in the middle of winter, in an open sided mini-moke. Groups of Melbourne women drove down together in car loads and in a kombi van. On the way they sang - changing the lyrics of known songs to lesbianize them. "I don't remember how I got there." (Jocelyn) "Floated there on a pink cloud. Floated back." (Jenny)

It was a very foggy night. I remember driving down in a car with Di. W. She barely had any brakes left on her car. We drove down all the way to Sorrento from Fitzroy really slowly changing down gears all the time because her brakes were hardly working at all.

I wonder if it was something of a prophecy of, or simile to, the conference - because we certainly didn't have the brakes on there.

The Adelaide hitch-hikers arrived late on Friday night, or maybe Saturday morning, in a great flurry. There was lots of excitement whenever anyone arrived from interstate.

Kaye's carload crawled there through the thick fog and arrived at 3 am. They were greeted by Di W. who was up watching Wimbledon, something she continued to do throughout the conference. Though we can remember few details, a lot of us do remember Di watching the tennis in the midst of the most amazing hysteria. Her attention barely wavering. (Tennis then was not a cult among lesbians as it is now. I'm sure we wouldn't have as much success with a conference held during

Wimbledon now.)

WHO WAS THERE?

We were quite a mixture except that we were all white, apart from one woman, and we were all fairly young, apart from one woman. We were pretty much all in our early or mid twenties. Sharon was only 17. We were from both working class and middle class backgrounds. There were some women there who probably didn't identify as lesbians, as well as women who were not quite sure and had probably come to find out though most of us were very definitely lesbians.

We had come from many different directions, not only geographically.

As far as occupations goes, there were a lot of students, especially university students, some workers, including a fair few teachers and even tertiary staff; some lesbians who worked sometimes and quite a few of us who were on the dole. That was quite an achievement then because there was virtually no unemployment at the time. They were prosperous times and being on the dole was a choice some activists made to allow time for political work. There were no paying feminist jobs in those days.

Politically we were coming together from diverse backgrounds. We'd been Gay Liberation activists, Women's Liberation activists and theorists, some had been very involved with the left, the anti-war movement, student movement, etc. Some were heavily involved in CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution, a homosexual reform group). Some lesbians had been involved in almost all or several of these groups. Others identified primarily or exclusively with one or another of them. Some women came from what we now call the bar dyke scene and some women came from nowhere. Dragged out of the suburbs or countryside by activist acquaintances doing 'outreach' they were meeting other lesbians for the first time.

So there was quite a cross over of experience. There were women there who were completely apolitical but came along because it was some sort of a lesbian gathering. They'd managed to hear about it but didn't have much of an idea what was going on politically.

There was one couple who lived in the suburbs with one of the woman's children and hadn't had contact with any lesbians before. Sharon organised someone to spend the weekend with their kids so that they could come to the conference. One of them at least, I know, went on to become very involved in Women's Liberation in Melbourne.

A woman called Linda, who was involved more in the (lesbian) softball scene, is remembered for arriving in her red MG sports car together with Sue who claims she can't remember anything about the conference because she was "engaged in other pursuits", i.e.. trying to organise to be in the same bed at the same time as Linda.

Lyndel found out about the conference from someone in her CR (consciousness raising) group because, though she was involved in Melbourne University Women's Liberation Group, they didn't talk about lesbians there. She says "I didn't know anyone except another friend from my CR group who I went down with, though I'd seen some of you around."

Lyndel remembers meeting Mel "A tall woman who was as shy as I was, so I spent a bit of time with her. I asked her about her story 'How long have you known you were a lesbian?' Mel's reply was 'Ooh, don't say that word!'" They visited each other a bit after that and the last time Lyndel saw her Mel was down in Melbourne from some Victorian country town saying that her girlfriend was still in the closet.

Bev too met Mel there for the first time and they are still friends. Bev recalls the hassles of being a full time mother while at the conference. Her daughter was about seven months old at the time.

Some of the Adelaide women coming from a feminist direction saw the lesbians who came from Gay Liberation, as being quite different to themselves. In contrast to the hitch-hikers, the gay women flew to Melbourne and seemed "more sophisticated, more confirmed in their lesbianism. They had a relationship with each other and were very much involved in the Gay Movement.

"Apart from them the rest of us were very much in the first throes of identifying as lesbians. There were a whole lot of links made between the Adelaide and Melbourne Women's Movement and particularly between the lesbians in Adelaide and Melbourne which still exist today very strongly. My feeling is that that happened even more strongly than the links between Melbourne and Sydney. Certainly much more strongly than the links between Adelaide and Sydney.

"After that time I was able to come and stay with women I had met there, and eventually come to Melbourne to live and have as my core group of people, women I'd met there two years ago, and other women from Adelaide likewise. They have been really long lasting contacts." (Di)

Jenny feels much the same; "When you think about it that vague 'old school tie' feeling of women that you've gone a long way with for a long time does all stem from Sorrento in a whole lot of ways."

So we all met, merged and exchanged politics and friendships, forming alliances that have lasted over the intervening 15 years.

BEING THERE

The Whitehall Guesthouse in Sorrento was a stately Victorian sort of building. It had a dining room with white starched tablecloths and silver cutlery. There were a couple of dormitories as well as smaller bedrooms and a large lounge room - where some women remember spending most of the time. We all stuck together in there pretty much as one group the whole time. We decorated

it with our Women's Liberation flag and Gay Lib banners. It was winter and cold but we felt "enclosed in ecstasy and bliss."

As Lyndel says, "Once we were there all hell broke loose." The owners of the Guesthouse soon realised they'd been invaded by a bunch of weirdos. No, much worse - lesbians. We weren't in the business of keeping it secret. Shortly after her arrival Sharon had taken over room allocation from the proprietor, perhaps sensing that they wouldn't be up to the job. She was a brave woman.

We remember that there were over 60 of us because the place was booked for 60 (or less) and we had an excess. This problem was solved by women agreeing to share beds and not appear for breakfast. Sharon had the unenviable task of working out who was going to share with who. A job that did not end on Friday night.

"I remember I was in charge of room allocation. It was very political, and complicated. Women kept coming up and saying 'Do you think you could arrange this?' and 'What about this?' and 'For god's sake don't put me in with her.' We had some system for allocating the rooms - but it completely came apart." (Sharon)

Sue remembers it too; "There was the big business of - it seems truly amazing in this day and age - but after day one we had to re-arrange all the room allocations in line with the new ..." (Last word indecipherable.)

"We didn't know what happened at conferences then." (Jenny) perhaps not, but we certainly set a precedent on that score. More about that later. I can't write all of the good bits at once lest I lose your attention for the serious stuff.

The most upsetting incident at Sorrento for everyone was, not the owner freaking out but the fact that he poisoned his children's minds towards us. They had initially been, and I think continued to be, attracted to our energy. However they were told to keep away from us. There after they hung out of windows and ran into the room abusing us with "You're bad women" and "You rude, disgusting things," and the like. Our reaction to this was quite dramatic - considering we were there to consolidate our fight against such attitudes.

There was also a problem with the staff at the Guesthouse who wouldn't work or refused to serve us, once they realised what we were. So there was a lot on the agenda besides the conference papers and issues. But perhaps we should look at them.

THE CONFERENCE PAPERS -

There were seven papers presented.

1. On Primary Relationships

This paper was the most memorable - or remembered. Written by Jenny and Sue it was basically about the conflict of trying to avoid hierarchies in relationships while still being committed to growth in your most important (primary) relationship - which in fact shouldn't be more important than the others (because that's heterosexist) - yet it is. If that's not clear read the paper (which I have copies of) and it still might not be.

The general opinion on this paper at the conference, according to Jenny, was; "That it was too sophisticated (tricky) to come to grips with - but there wasn't anything in it anyone could argue with. But nobody leapt up and said 'This is the way forward!'"

Despite the confusion in the paper and our confusion about the paper it was tackling the issue of monogamy. Non-monogamy was a hot topic among the Radicalesbians. It was about "getting out of the oppressive forms of the hetero-culture; particularly families which we'd all come from."

The Primary Relationships paper, according to Jenny, who wrote it, was; "A rationalisation on how we could be politically correctly non-monogamous - but basically be monogamous underneath."

The continuing confusion about it is reflected in this little exchange by the authors while discussing in the group interview for this paper:

Jenny - "I don't know how we got around the hierarchical structure of primary and secondary relationships ..."

Sue - "We decided that was alright."

Jenny - "We did not."

Other women remember it as a paper on primary and secondary relationships. Lin remembered it as a paper on primary and tertiary relationships! Whatever they might be in the hierarchy. However this paper did help us to pursue the cause of non-hierarchical, non-monogamous relationships.

Another woman recalled; "I was in the process of breaking up, I was carrying a broken heart. So much of my thinking was centred on my own personal angst (at the conference). But I remember feeling very dubious about the success of conducting primary and secondary relationships. However, it did generate in me an urge to espouse a "multiple relationships" philosophy, which I did my best to enact in the following years. That came from the conference really."

Finally Lyndel's view of this paper, which might and might not surprise the authors, was; "Sue and Jenny were wondering about the 'theoretical' woman who lived in their house who they both really liked and why they didn't get off with her as well - that sort of thing."

2. Bisexuality

Written by June, Jenny and Barb, this was easily the most controversial paper. After the Primary Relationships paper it is the most memorable one in women's minds. Mainly because it generated so much hostility.

The infamous paper on bisexuality consisted of only one page: A quote from the book 'Sappho Was a Right On Woman' which implied that bisexuality might be the way forward for the Women's Movement, and a list of questions for discussion. The general implication was that bisexuality was the really non-sexist form of relating because only bisexuality was breaking down gender divisions.

Jenny recalls "June and Jenny (a different Jenny) had written this paper on bisexuality, which was roughly about - it's ok to be bisexual too - but they were unnerved at the idea of delivering it in case they were shot down in flames.

"Barb cheerfully said; 'Don't worry. I'll present it.' Which she did and was shot down in flames. Gaby chased her round for the rest of the conference with a plastic spider which she interpreted as being punishment for having said very much the wrong thing.

"I think that some of the reaction to that at the time was formed by the fact that a common way to come out to people when it was a bit dodgy was to tell them you were bisexual first and lead in gradually. Whereas now I think people's parents would be just as horrified at the thought that you were bisexual. But then there really was a feeling that it was more acceptable to be bisexual. It's important to understand the howl down that Barb got in terms of the fact that for a lot of women there bisexuality would've been a huge red herring they'd chased for a while. One woman I know told her mother she was bisexual and she'd never had the slightest interest in a bloke at all."

This idea came from a theoretical reading of feminism by not yet lesbian women. They felt that if gender differentiation was done away with it meant you could be attracted to women. (Being attracted to men being compulsory.) So claiming bisexuality really meant claiming lesbianism.

Our resentment towards the Bisexual paper stemmed from the fact that we were reclaiming our lesbianism. That was the oppression we were fighting. Bisexuality might only be possible after the revolution. Meanwhile bisexuals were only trying to reap the privileges of heterosexuality while enjoying the benefits of lesbianism.

3. Turning The Fan Around

This paper by Barb analysed and dismissed the false images about lesbians and affirmed our identity. It was about learning to feel positive about being lesbian and what it means to be a Radicalesbian and how to undermine the shit society heaps on us.

It is an eloquent, almost poetic affirmation. I'm surprised it wasn't better remembered. I guess that's because there isn't anything in it a Radicalesbian might disagree with - nor feel confronted by in the way *Primary Relationships* was controversial.

4. Feminist Consciousness and Sexuality

In this paper Kerry introduced the concept that sexuality is more than just fucking. Rather it is a form of energy which can be expressed on different levels in different ways. It is not just genital sex. Just because women are not lesbians in the sense of genital fucking with women does not mean they aren't woman-identified-women. Just as a woman can be a lesbian and not yet be a feminist. It also posited that we shouldn't pressure women into fucking with women in order to be a 'Right On Feminist'. For it to count it has to be an honest decision based on genuine attraction to a woman. The paper's style is both very personal and very collective.

5. Feminist Culture

This was the paper that I gave at the conference. It basically said we should create a new women's culture. That we should research what has gone before to create a context and create a new reality for ourselves now by seizing mediums such as print, television, radio, etc. and use them to create a reality that has long been denied to us in the male culture.

Some of the suggestions seem very obvious now. However at the time women's films, radio programs, books, magazines and a lot of herstorical research did not exist. Nor did lesbian music, land, etc.

6. Radicalesbian Manifesto

We wrote this paper as a group. It is a reclaiming of the word lesbian, a call to visibility, to breaking down divisions between women and a recognition that all oppressions are sexist. It challenged us to make a commitment to act to end our oppression on all levels. It declared that we wanted more than equality - that we want a revolutionary restructuring of society including a feminist culture.

There is some idea this paper may have been just a reading of the New York Radicalesbian manifesto. However the Australian language in it marks it as our composition.

7. Dependency

This too was a group paper written by the Melbourne Radicalesbians. It also questioned the old ways of relating and encouraged us to develop our autonomy as individuals. It encouraged lesbians to develop a mutual inter-dependence only in the positive sense - rather than becoming reliant on re-assurance and support from lovers only.

Original participants remember this paper for the fascinating diagrams which it utilised which resembled scrambled eggs.

OTHER ISSUES

Quite a number of other issues were brought up and discussed during the weekend. "One of the many discussions was; what do we do about parents? What do you do about coming out?" (Di) This topic went on and on.

Coming out was talked about at Saturday breakfast. "I was sitting at the breakfast table with some women and they asked me how I'd come out to my parents as being a lesbian. I hadn't told them ... I uhh ... I hadn't really told myself yet." (Lyndel) No doubt the embarrassment she felt at the time is why she remembers this incident so well.

Another issue thrashed out was whether you were a lesbian if you had never fucked with a woman. "I hadn't had a relationship with a woman at that stage and I suspect that there were a few of us who hadn't. Certainly there were more of us there who were involved in our first relationship." (Di) The discussion even stretched to whether you were a lesbian if you weren't on with anyone at the time.

In response to this we talked about the concept of women-identified-women. That is; if your commitment is to women and you embrace the concept of being a lesbian in your heart, unless you just happen to find yourself in bed with a woman, you have to make the decision you are a lesbian before you become one in practice.

"We kind of decided that a lesbian was a woman-identified-woman." (Jocelyn)

Our topics of discussion were not confined to purely lesbian issues. We very much mixed together the inextricably intertwined issues of lesbian liberation and women's liberation. One crucial topic was refuges.

"I remember one discussion on the need to set up refuges for young women - so that young women would have somewhere to escape to, so they didn't end up in Winlaton. (The girl's prison in Melbourne.) It was a heated discussion which I felt strongly about because of my own experience. I wanted a place for girls to be safe in. There were women from Sydney who were talking about ideas for a women's refuge in Sydney (which was to become Elsie) and the

general need for refuges for women. And we had a long conversation about how we felt that we couldn't really set up a refuge for young women who were under age (for legal reasons) - so the discussion then started to go on to women from marriages and their children. We decided to provide places for women, that girls would be able to come into. Because if we set up one for girls everyone would just come down on us and we'd never be allowed to get it done. We were building on other conversations we'd had but it was one of the first conversations that led directly into the formation of the Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective in Melbourne. That was a time when there was only talk of setting up refuges in Sydney. I think it was quite an important conference in the development of the refuge movement." (Sharon)

On Sunday afternoon a woman called Margaret arrived. She had convened a Catholic gay group called, I think, Acceptance. She gave a talk about the need for acceptance in the Catholic church. Talking about religion, and especially Catholic religion made everyone very uncomfortable and the atmosphere got tense.

Her appearance alone caused quite a bit of consternation. For a start she was considerably older than the rest of us - at least in her fifties. For all our theory about ageism we found it difficult to know how to handle this older lesbian.

We were used to mixing with a lot of older straight women in Women's Liberation but, as Jenny puts it; "They were kind of second chance at a better mother type of deal. They liked the young dykes. They thought we were the hope of the future. That we were their better children and they were our better mothers."

Sharon, in contrast remembers that the older women, who had come from the Left to set up Women's Liberation, felt a lot of hostility, confusion and fear towards the Radicalesbians. In fact there were probably mixed feelings on both sides.

However Margaret was a different kettle of fish. Here was someone of our mother's generation, and a lesbian. A practising Catholic who wanted to work in the church. What's more she didn't fit in with our style at all. We were very anti-feminine in our dress style. It was all ex-army disposal and Mao-Tse-Tung cap type gear. We were in deep reaction against our newly abandoned conditioning.

"She turned up on Sunday. After we'd all established our 'esprit de corp' anyway. She walked into the room - this large, older woman, wearing a dress and all made up and plonked down on the couch. There was a stunned silence. Who was this woman? No-one knew quite how to handle this. What would we do with her? How could things go on as before with her there?" (Sue)

Anyway she proved quite capable of holding her own ground. Lyndel remembers a heated discussion on abortion and that it was the angriest discussion we had. Abortion was a big issue in

Women's Liberation at the time. The fight to get it legalised was in full swing. I can only assume this discussion was an argument we had with Margaret.

Eventually she left after a few hours. However it was a bit of a shock to our feeling of oneness. On the Melbourne tape I sense a genuine remorse at our inability then to more easily embrace Margaret into the sisterhood.

MORE FUN

On the Saturday night we put on some music and had a party and had a bit of a dance to let off some of the excess high energy. Everyone was dancing and jumping around except for Di who was still glued to the television watching the tennis in the midst of it all.

Everyone was super-doooper excited. That was the overriding atmosphere. We were all really excitable and overjoyed at being there together - really blown out that 60 plus lesbians could get together at one time in one place. It seemed like such a huge number then.

THE SONGS

We did a lot of singing down at Sorrento. We were busily changing the words to existing songs. There was one, which I think goes to the tune of the Union Maid

“You can't get me I'm a Radicalesbian,
You can't get me I'm a Radicalesbian,
You can't get me I'm a Radicalesbian
Till the day I die ...”

We had song sheets made for the conference which unfortunately haven't survived, as far as I know.

Jenny would like it to be known that Sorrento was the first ever performance of “Gay Sera Sera” which became famous in our version of “Che Sera Sera”. Lin remembers we were also singing;

“Kill kill kill the men, kill the men with glee,
Merrily merrily merrily, drown them in the sea.” I suppose to rounds.

The really big hit though was when Kerryn sang some songs she'd written and composed on guitar herself. One in particular had a women's liberation type message. It was “Time That We Saw A Change”. This was the first actual self composed women's liberation song that any of us had ever heard. It was well before the days of ‘Women's Music’. It was a dynamic song with a message in the kind of driving style that perfectly fitted our mood at the time.

At some stage Sharon and Gail gave Tae Kwon Do demonstrations, while Margie picked nits out

of someone's hair and Kaye knitted; "I remember being accosted about knitting. For some reason, and I can't think why, it had unsound overtones. That made me feel uncomfortable."

We only had one real group excursion during the weekend. A bunch of us went down to the beach. Some went swimming, in absolutely freezing weather. There wasn't anybody much on the beach except us however the locals were well aware of our presence - thanks to Katie. She, and I think someone else, had done a good job of spray painting Sorrento with lesbian messages. A very educational experience for them I'm sure.

PRACTISING THE THEORY

"One of the funny things I remember was that we said you shouldn't say you fucked somebody because that was sort of hierarchical domination. Sharon had this habit of saying 'Fuck me dead', and we changed it to 'Fuck with me dead!'" (Jocelyn)

"Talking about wanting to get rid of all the structures we knew about before in relationships - being at the conference as a single lesbian rather than in a couple - I felt completely comfortable. I felt really good in that collection of women about not having a lover too. I felt as included as I am sure women who were there with lovers felt included.

"I think we were all being very committed just in that way - in the immediate breaking down of a lot of structures that previously had been imposed on us about divisions between lovers and non-lovers." (Di)

"That shows up in the photos - in fact it is very rarely you see two women who were on together even in the same photo." (Jenny)

"In the ones where women are 'coupling' it is clearly the ones who sort of found each other there." (Sue)

"I remember the whole thing as a very sexual experience. Sensual and sexual. That we were touching each other a lot. Also women were fucking a lot - not that we were all fucking together in the same room - but it was very openly acknowledged that women were on together too. And somehow that mixture was all able to be recognised at the same time. From my point of view, without feeling excluded - as a single woman." (Di)

Certainly by this stage the guesthouse managers were not only put out by the fact that we were lesbians- but we were also fulfilling all their worst prejudices about lesbians. Mattresses were being dragged from room to room and there was a sort of transparent hysteria every mealtime as women ran around to various bedrooms negotiating who, of our exploded numbers, was going to appear in the dining room then exclaiming about who had been found together.

Women were shifting rooms at a great rate as new alliances were made. I remember there was a

very steamy atmosphere in the dormitory I was in. There were quite a few bunks and even more women, all fucking in the same room - only in twos - but all the same it was pretty full on.

There was a lot of getting off together because everyone was in such a hyper state of excitement. After all we were all sisters.

“Yes, going to bed with someone, you could walk around being celebratory about, not just because it felt nice personally - but because it was a terrific thing for the politics. So you could feel really terrific about it.” (Sue)

“I slept with one woman. I can’t remember what her name was, what she looks like, who she was, I just got off with her one night there and she had black fishnet stockings on which she wore to bed. That’s all I can remember and I haven’t got a clue who she was.” (Anon.)

So apart from talking about the theory there was a lot of it actually happening at the conference; monogamy, non-monogamy, etc. Not only is sisterhood powerful, but it seemed then that Sisterhood is Sexual.

As Jenny said; “We didn’t know what happens at conferences then.” But now we do. This phenomenon of licentiousness - going beyond customary bounds or limits, the shrugging off of usual relationship structures - continues to be an ever present feature of heady gatherings of women around the world. Whenever we get together in larger, diverse groups we seem more able to break loose of social constructs - even our own lesbian versions of them. We simply get off on being together. The joy of meeting overcomes the fear of losing. It seems to explode the addiction to known securities. Is it an expression of our truer selves that only comes out in situations offering great support? I don’t mean to put down couples. Couples too were formed here. What I mean is; usually we are so busy defending ourselves from the physical and mental onslaughts of heterosexual society that it suppresses something of our spontaneity. Our ability to love each other freely.

WHAT DID WE RESOLVE?

Once the shenanigans were drawing to a close we had to consider where were we going from there? Later I’ll go into some of the things we got up to after the conference and that originated from it. The impact of the conference continued on in our political and personal lives. We did not however make a lot of definite resolutions which we then implemented in an organised way.

“It was very much something that we conveyed to each other on a more personal political level rather than coming out of it with strategies, demands and directions.” (Di)

We did, however, decide as a group to go into Women’s Liberation and get women to accept our lesbianism and that lesbianism should be taken up as an issue. We also emphasised that it was

not something that should be hidden in order to get public respectability. The, as it still is now, accusations of being lesbians was used to intimidate feminists from espousing radical positions.

We also resolved to set up women's halfway houses (refuges) - which was definitely implemented. We further resolved to work on child-care, reaching out to women 'out there', research our herstory, commemorate the witches, and generally to act to fight for the liberation of women in general and lesbians in particular. As mentioned before the two causes were seen as inseparable.

Participants have strong memories of the conference; "The main thing about it was the identity that it gave us. Somehow having been away and lived together, however briefly just gave us a much greater sense of our identity than a lot of meetings would've done." (Jocelyn)

"It took me a lot longer to work out what it meant in practice, than Sorrento itself." (Di)

A lot of women agree that they never felt quite like they did at Sorrento again. That it was an exhilarating experience. "Easily one of the highest points of my life." (Lin) And yet there were conflicts, ideological disagreements and things like Barb being chased round by a spider and Kaye being accosted for knitting. There was a lot of pressure to conform to an ideology and an image. Yet, at the time, few women were alienated from this. Rather they were drawn to the sense of unity, the feeling of oneness - the sisterhood.

There was a sense of what was ideologically sound and unsound, but we were still in the process of working it out. Of discovering it. There was a strong sense that it was good to question your stance and your inner reactions because they just might be nasty conditioned responses. The adventure of these (ideological) discoveries was exciting and attractive.

Though it had its faults the conference left a good feeling and it was successful in its method. "It was a really anti-structure conference, and it really worked too. The conferences since then have been a lot more structured with workshops, papers, timetables, and all that and they are bigger and not residential." (Jocelyn)

"It was something about that whole range of elements; it was small enough that you could all be there and know each other. You were living there." (Sue) There was a good balance between the serious of political discussion and playing together. So we took our ideas and our friendships away with us.

DEPARTURE DRAMA

When it came time to leave on the Sunday afternoon we were began making our protracted farewells for our unorganised departure. Meanwhile the owner of the Guesthouse was checking the rooms for missing items. I guess he only expected the likes of us to be thieves and scoundrels.

He discovered what the Melbourne women remember to be one missing blanket. I remember there was something else unlikely missing too - such as an iron or an extension cord.

His reaction was to blockade the front gate driveway with his car - effectively barricading in all our cars, which were in the yard. He refused to move it until we handed over the missing articles or paid for them.

It may be that he actually blockaded the gate before conducting his search - which had already inspired us into a state of righteous anger. In any event there was a huge argument over this blanket.

The two women who actually had the blanket had made an early get-away. Though we guessed they were responsible we had no intention of being intimidated in any way. We demanded he move his car and he demanded the blanket or the money.

Eventually he called the police. The lone Sorrento constable arrived to be confronted with upwards of 50 angry lesbians demanding he order the owner to move his car.

The policeman tried for a while to establish who might be responsible for the missing goods. His main tack was to ask repeatedly who was in charge of our group. This caused a great derisive response from us - positively reveling with glee at our non-hierarchical structure.

At one stage the owner, who had temporarily disappeared, emerged from the guesthouse triumphantly waving a piece of paper. It was the letter written to make the booking for the Guesthouse. It had been signed by Kerryn.

This person, the policeman determined, must be our leader - and so responsible for the restitution of stolen goods. He kept asking which one of us was Kerryn. There followed a superb piece of spontaneous revolutionary theatre - in which all 50 of us walked endlessly round in circles saying; 'Where's Kerryn? Are you Kerryn?' and replying 'No, I'm not Kerryn, are you Kerryn?' Including Kerryn herself. Eventually the policeman gave up and informed the fuming Guesthouse manager that he would just have to move his car.

Here was our first great triumph. The wonders of our radical non-hierarchical feminist structure forcing male authority to crumble hopelessly before it. So would the revolution progress. Men would simply be unable to deal with us, so far were we outside their oppressive structures.

The policeman's announcement was greeted with cheers and whoops. Not because we were happy to be going home but because we had won the battle. You can imagine with what glee we made our progress back to Melbourne and beyond.

Jenny remembers that on her way back to Melbourne she stopped at a cafe. And who should be there but the proud possessors of a new blanket et al, chuckling away at their own cheek. They

were quite unimpressed by her account of the protracted drama of our later departure.

Sue recalls; “That was a real drama. Had the manager known the sort of fervour and general crossness in attitude to (a) men (b) authoritarianism (c) private property and (d) any hint of oppressive attitudes he wouldn’t have been game; its lucky he survived it.”

If that hadn’t been enough there was a bit more; “When we got half way back to Melbourne I remembered that because there’d been that big brawl when we left, I actually still had the keys to all the rooms. I only threw them out a couple of years ago.” (Sharon)

THE IMPACT

That was the end of that chapter but the reverberations went on. Most immediately it resulted in us going back to the groups we had come from with stars in our eyes.

“It was so exhilarating the small group from Adelaide went back with dazzled eyes and would have appeared like they’d made a new discovery that was ‘the way forward’. Other women, who hadn’t been there would have found it quite daunting, and a bit worrying perhaps.” (Di)

“There were a number of contacts set up with Sydney as well ... There was a similar sort of swap over - but it didn’t last in the same sort of way, partly I guess because there were a number of judiciously selected relationships which kept the Adelaide/Melbourne one going more - which only happened because the strong links were created in the first place.” (Di)

Though strong links were formed with Sydney they did not originate so immediately out of Sorrento as those with Adelaide. One reason could be; “I guess Sydney is a larger city than Melbourne or Adelaide. Women tend to be much more self sufficient whereas certainly Adelaide women needed other contacts. Melbourne was the next closest and Melbourne being smaller than Sydney was more open to broadening contact.” (Di)

Our post conference relations with some women from Sydney were not aided by a certain post-conference scandal. It happened via the Tasmanian women’s newsletter ‘Liberaction’ which published a scathing article about Radicalesbians and the Sorrento conference in particular.

It related the incident of Margaret’s uncomfortable experience with us and called us the high priestesses of the women’s movement, accusing us of being just a new religion.

We found out later it was attributable to two Sydney women who had been to the Conference. They were active in CAMP - a low key homosexual reform group which felt threatened by the new liberation movements and their outrageous behaviour. Obviously those women had not left the conference with a similar impression to most of the rest of us. At first we didn’t know they were the source of the article.

That 'Liberaction' should publish a scathing article about us was no surprise. Not that that diminished our outrage. 'Liberaction' was infamous amongst us as being the voice of a very heavy bunch of dykes, whose main activity seemed to be putting down women who were not part of their scene.

Even now, as soon as they were mentioned on the Melbourne tape there was a chorus of "Oh, them!" reactions. We called their newsletter a 'gossip sheet'. They were, then, one of our re-occurrent foils. Needless to say they had not bothered to turn up at Sorrento.

Back to Sydney. Up until the conference there wasn't a group in Sydney comparable to the Melbourne Radicalesbians. We were a real first. It was a new idea. After the conference Sydney lesbians began to organise similarly. Their activities were centred on households in first Crystal Street and then Palace Street and a crazy conglomeration in a rambling old mansion called Canterbury Castle.

Meanwhile in Melbourne we were descending on the Women's Centre with a vengeance. We had regular Radicalesbian meetings there which grew and grew. They were big meetings of 50 women at a time.

"What was interesting about that time too was that all those women came to those meetings because here was something finally, some point of identification. But there was a peer group pressure to have politics in it. It wasn't like you could just come to the parties. If you were going to be part of that you had to be part of the politics too, which I think is an interesting difference from what happened later. And women did. There were a lot of them who didn't come along for the politics - but liked having them."

Though the expression of a lot of our ideas was rather intellectual, and possibly incomprehensible to less educated women, they were sincerely felt. So that even when lesbians turned up just looking for other lesbians they were taken in by the added bonus of an atmosphere in which women were saying 'It's great to be a lesbian!' At one stage there was a mailing list of 200 which was added to at women's dances and other events.

"In terms of the women's movement as a whole and the question of lesbian demands to go alongside other demands that had always been there - like child care, equal pay and so on - my memory is that didn't really reach a pitch until 1975-76. That it took us from the Sorrento Conference, where we did talk about how to introduce a lesbian perspective into the feminist stuff we were involved in then, till then before we got towards achieving that. It took us a couple of years more of working with other women - and the other lesbians too - not just the heterosexual women, to really raise the issue onto the agenda. Sorrento was only a beginning.

"We were very much babies I think. In terms of politics generally - let alone lesbian politics vs women's politics vs gay politics." (Di)

“Our main concern in terms of the Women’s Movement was to get it accepted, rather than to get the issues on the agenda, for some time.” (Sue)

“I think we did have an impact and changed some things which on the one hand you can say are forgotten or taken for granted - and yet because they have been taken for granted and been absorbed they have had long reaching effects.” (Sharon)

Sue says she thinks we, in conjunction with Gay Liberation, made a big impact on society as a whole. That coming out now is not nearly as much the daunting prospect it was in the 1950s and 1960s. We did change the social consciousness on homosexuality and lesbianism.

“It is a different thing now to be 16 and a dyke - there are a whole lot of things that weren’t there then that you have to face now - but there’s a whole lot of things that they don’t have to face in quite the same way. The fact that there are 16 year olds deciding they are dykes in such numbers. Only a couple of hundred people changed all that.” (Sue)

But perhaps I’m jumping ahead a bit now. The impact of the Radicalesbians did not stem solely from the conference itself. Though that was a landmark. We talked about and did a lot of other things as well.

RADICALESBIAN IDEOLOGY

What a lesbian is, and what a lesbian relationship is, was the major topic we wrestled with originally. We soon decided that monogamy was really bad - because it was the imitation of the heterosexual way of relating. So we tried to work out alternatives.

“I remember we used to have diagrams. When we were talking about relationships we were always drawing circles and working out how women inter-link and where they fit in the world. That we were furiously drawing diagrams of - well this is the relationship, this is where you are located within it and this is how this connects up.” (Sharon) The diagrams Sharon is referring to were most probably the ones used in the paper on Dependency.

We had very high aspirations for what we could cope with. We were really very idealistic. “It was also trying to explore what your sexuality was, where it came from, what it is for. We were idealistic. It was considered very wrong to be a couple for a while there.” (Lyndel)

This had a lasting effect on the political lesbian community. For quite a long time afterwards it was really uncool to be seen as a couple. Not that women weren’t, but you, more likely than not, tried not to be seen as couplish.

“It took me a long time to think that relationships actually had a possibility of lasting - not from outside pressure, but because you wanted to be in them.” (Lyndel)

When you went to a dance or a meeting it was really not done to act like a couple with the woman you were on with. It was much easier to kiss or hug somebody else than the woman you were on with, because it made you look like a couple. Women didn't want to share houses with women who were on together.

There were reasons for all this of course. Couples were seen to be isolating for other women. We were trying to foster a sense of sisterhood. The individual within the group. We talked about relating a lot - but there were some things we didn't talk about so much.

"The truth of the matter is that we didn't talk much about fucking. We talked about being 'on with', but in terms of actually talking about sex and what was actually done - that was something that we didn't talk about. ...We never talked about orgasms. It was much more sort of about touchy feeling - that was seen as being important. That you could touch, that you could love, that you could feel something. I think that we then held back from getting into the real nitty-gritty. Which we got into later." (Sharon)

"I think it would have been hard to do that because at the time women were talking about everything being sort of sexual; like your job was sexual, and this was sexual, and your feelings for a friend were sexual and where do you delineate?" (Lyndel)

This was a very strong part of our ideology at the time; that sex shouldn't be an isolated thing, that there was a continuum from friendship to affection to sexuality. Therefore love relationships should not be seen as being fundamentally more important. From that came the idea of a lesbian being a woman-identified-woman, because you didn't have to actually fuck to be a lesbian - that's not what it was about.

I think this was partly a reaction to the perverse and pervasive societal image of lesbians being totally sexual creatures. That this attitude is still very much current was illustrated to me by a story a friend told me just recently. She was socialising with a group of fellow women law students - all of whom were heterosexual apart her. One of them suggested they go out to a disco - where they might meet some attractive men. My friend said "or women". The heterosexual woman replied "Don't you ever think about anything but sex." Completely ignoring the fact that it was she who had suggested they go and pick up some men!

THE U.S INFLUENCE -

We were influenced a lot in our ideas by articles we read in U.S. magazines and anthologies. Often we were developing in tandem with those. There were in particular some excellent thought provoking articles which we reprinted and distributed quite widely amongst ourselves and other lesbians and potential lesbians. I have kept copies of them until now which I occasionally pull out to show women. Here is a summary of some of them;

Living Without Men - defines how lesbians have been made invisible and how society creates prejudices against lesbianism even in lesbians themselves. It explains the importance of 'gay pride' in altering that. It also explains how women's and lesbian oppression are part and parcel of the same thing and that Women's Liberation demands are doubly relevant to lesbians. For example, Equal Pay for Equal Work - because almost all lesbians support themselves and suffer from inferior female pay rates.

Loving Another Woman - was by Anne Koedt, a founder of the radical feminist movement in New York. It is the transcript of a taped interview with a woman who talked about her love relationship with another woman. Both these women had previously only had heterosexual relationships and both were feminists.

It is a personal account of feeling attraction, coming to terms with it, acting on it, how it is better than heterosexuality and the political and personal implications. It is a good combination of the personal and political and describes the process heterosexual feminist goes through in discovering her lesbianism.

Woman-Identified-Woman - was a paper written by New York Radicalesbians in 1970. It was a statement of what it is to be a lesbian under the patriarchy and the problems lesbians encounter. 'Lesbian is the word that holds women in line'. Men have made lesbian merely a sexual category. This frightens hetero women off. The use of the word lesbian intimidates women from giving their primacy to women. Women have been forced to gain what identity they have through men. We must develop our own sense of identity through and with women. Women should reject the primacy of one to one relationships with men. It is through the primacy of women relating to women that we'll establish our identity. The woman-identified-woman.

This paper took the tack that being lesbian wasn't about being sexual with women. Men had made that limited definition. It was about making women the most important thing in your life generally - which was an important position to take in a world where anyone who did that was abused as a dyke, whether she is one or not.

The Shape Of Things To Come - was written by the now rather famous Rita Mae Brown in 1972. It is a surprisingly radical tract - saying that heterosexuality is a cop out for any feminist. That heterosexual women are just clinging to heterosexual privilege and refusing to give their commitment to women.

"If you cannot find it in yourself to love another woman, and that includes physical love, then how can you truly say you care about Women's Liberation?" She also condemns bisexuality with; "You can't have your cake and eat it too."

Further she says that lesbianism makes one aware of all oppressions, such as class, race, etc. She outlines a brief program for change as a first step to organised struggle - suggesting we form a

political party. It ends with “Forward sisters, forward.”

Apart from our awareness of what was going on in the U.S.A. we were very parochial. We had no information about lesbians anywhere else. Not even, as far as I can recall, in England. They weren't publishing and sending out their ideas as the Americans were.

We were hardly aware at all of the previous waves of feminism - and lesbian activism. We were still to research all that. We felt this was a brand new idea, an emerging ideology - a revolutionary answer to all women's woes which would catch on like wildfire and be unstoppable. It was as simple as letting women know it was there and they would burst into radical action just like we were. As the meetings of both Women's Liberation and the Radicalesbians were growing in number and intensity this assumption seemed to be true.

“There was an expectation (in Radicalesbians) that you couldn't have reformist demands. You had to have revolutionary demands - which limited you quite a bit ... We rejected anything that assumed the status quo and male dominated society was likely to continue for some time.” (Jocelyn)

“And we were going to change it and it was all going to happen in the next five years. You didn't have to be too specific about it because good will would carry the day.” (Jenny)

COMING OUT

Coming out was one of these revolutionary imperatives.

“We were being more specific about it in our personal lives in terms of who we 'came out' to and the importance of coming out. Rather than being specific in how we saw social change as happening from each of us outwards and somehow, in an inarticulated way, changing the consciousness of the whole society.

“I think too we were hard on ourselves. I felt a bit daunted by a lot of things women were saying about having told and being very open about their lesbianism. I knew that I wasn't able to do that. I couldn't. But I felt guilty about not doing it. It was a revolutionary imperative, to be like that.

“We had very high expectations of ourselves and each other. Women who didn't come out to their families and at work or whatever felt like they were betraying us - I felt like I was betraying us.

“I think some of that came from us being too focused on the immediate and less focused on how you might organise together to go about social change which should've gone hand in hand with what one does individually.” (Di)

“The idea was that you individually could make a decision to step free of all the oppressive

structures - and that the revolution depended on it. Not that some of these things might have something more than just your acquiescence going for them.” (Sue)

Contrary perhaps to Di and Sue I do think that we had a broader perspective. We felt that if we ‘came out’ and made sure those around us did too, then eventually everyone would come out and so it would become impossible to keep us down. However the fact that it is only moderately easier and safer to come out now shows that there is more to it than personal bravery.

The determined way we enacted this policy in our lives is illustrated by a story of Sharon’s:

“I remember going out to the telephone in the middle of one of the Radicalesbian meetings and ringing up my mother because I’d decided that right, I was going to tell her now! She had met Chris, so I said to her ‘You know Chris, who you’ve met, well she’s a lesbian!’ Click. Mum hung up the phone.”

Lyndel’s comment to that was; “You really came out - telling her Chris was a lesbian!” Sharon says; “Well that was my way of coming out. I went back to the meeting and said; ‘Well I did it.’”

We felt a lot of group pressure in the Radicalesbians. In our group process we tried to take the highest common denominator. For example if someone ‘came out’ with stunning courage and success in a hostile situation we all aspired to that. We assumed that what one woman could do everyone could do. We didn’t recognise the level of support we needed to do a lot of those things in the long term.

I think in the short term the high, the confidence, the positive perspective and the initial closeness of the group gave us lots of courage. It was very secure. The enemy was outside. We had a tremendous sense of belonging, of having found our niche and purpose in life.

“We were all impassioned.” (Di)

“We were trying to prove ourselves.” (Jocelyn)

It was difficult in that it put heavy pressure on everyone - which was one of the reasons we split up later on. The positive side of it was that it pushed us to strive for things. Now-a-days tolerance is more the fashion so we don’t challenge, and therefore inspire, each other to fight for our dreams so forcefully.

“At some stage it changed to where suddenly it was ok for women to just come to the parties ... the passing on of politics started to stop. Having expectations of each other helped you to actually do difficult things. You did in fact get support for doing them.” (Sue)

There was more a sense, then, of being part of a thriving, growing, recognisable movement - which gave you courage to act, even when out on your own. “Like you’d trot round the city with your 6

to 12 badges on, and when you saw a revolting advertisement you'd pull out your spray can and paint it up then and there. You felt there were a lot of women with you." (Jenny)

"That kind of group identity always has its disadvantages and dangers. Of course that means if you were, for example, to take a sexual position not approved of by the group, that group is also there in the bedroom with you, watching you do it. I remember us discovering lesbians who didn't think it was ideologically unsound to behave like 'men' with the butch lying on top and putting her fingers inside! We never even talked about that being not acceptable. We just knew it wasn't done. Because there were always women in the bedroom (figuratively speaking) telling us not to." (Jenny)

"The man in your head and the woman in your bedroom!" (Jocelyn)

"If I had to pick between being by myself in the bedroom and being by myself while I trot round the streets I think I'd still choose to have all those women in the bedroom with me - the streets are a dam sight more frightening alone." (Jenny)

"We don't have so much in common with women now. You can't tell them they are out of line because we are not committed to a common thing." (Jocelyn)

"I think I've come to have a more complex understanding of who we are in terms of why we pursue certain things in our lives. ... We've all been through a really hard time in trying to change a whole lot of social constructs in a really short space of time. Since the late seventies till now we've all started to realise how complicated we all are individually, and collectively as well. There's a lot of grey, as well as the black and whites we saw in 1973 with such clarity and glee. I would never have wanted to miss out on the black and whites and I still use them as a reference point.

"But for me to go on negotiating my life with integrity and with other people the greys have become, in the 80s, more important to understand in terms of how we go about social change. So that social change isn't just about us who might identify as lesbians at Sorrento in 1973. Social change is about all women, but beyond that, to being working class, and being black and being whatever kind of particular oppression someone experiences. That's a complexity I'm still trying to grapple with in terms of what that means about my personal, but also my political life. ...

"I do think there is a heap of greys and you can't just be black and white, but you can challenge each other about what you are doing and why - but in the greys much more now rather than in the black and white. Though I think those moments of clarity are really important too." (Di)

"What I think we were predominantly trying to do then was to live the post-revolution before we'd even figured out anything about what was even the structure of what we were living in, and how you might actually go about changing it. We thought we didn't have to because it was going

to be changed. It was just gonna happen.

“There is a certain luxury in being able to live the post-revolution that we don’t have now; (a) because we know more about the greys and (b) because of the realities which are impinging on us more and more. I mean, who can afford to live on the dole now and go to conferences on the dole, etc.

“I hanker a bit after some of the challenging stuff and I hanker a bit after the clarity - but at the same time I recognize that that sort of clarity wouldn’t be of much use. When I run across it now, the similar sort of bright eyed clarity, I find it infuriating - and difficult to deal with. I want to sit them down and give them a lecture.” (Sue)

The image of us being completely introverted in our own little world is somewhat belied by the list of actions we initiated and/or took part in during 1973 and immediately after. Many of these are almost forgotten . So I want to recount some of them now.

RADICALESBIANS IN ACTION

Once I started thinking about it the list of actions that we were involved in became larger and larger. So much so that I don’t know how much of it to include here. We were constantly demonstrating about something or another, as well as writing and printing leaflets, having meeting or doing mail outs. We devoted our lives day and night to political action and discussion. We lived very much in each other’s pockets, feeding off that group energy.

We also spent a lot of time reading political tracts like the ‘SCUM Manifesto’ and ‘Monster’. ‘Monster’ a collection of poetry put out in the early 1970s by Robin Morgan especially became something of a bible to us. It contained several lesbian poems and was brilliant, rhetorical, political feminist poetry. We studied it constantly for inspiration, and most of us could quote verbatim many verses from it. Some of the conference papers and reports of the conference are replete with can quotes from ‘Monster’.

The collection included a poem called ‘Arraignment’ which accused the well-known English poet Ted Hughes of murdering both the feminist heroine Sylvia Plath and his next wife who committed suicide by the same method she had used. The version in the Random House publication of Monster was a censored one. The original was considered too libelous. Random House had made an agreement with Ted Hughes which forced Robin Morgan to write a milder version for publication.

The Radicalesbians wrote to Robin Morgan for the original version of Arraignment and published a pirate edition of ‘Monster’. It contained both versions and an account by Robin Morgan of her processes in writing both versions.

By chance the Royal Shakespeare Company came to Melbourne in 1973 to perform a combined reading of poetry by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Little did they know what we'd been up to! The Radicalesbian gang rocked up to the show armed with piles of Arraignment 1, along with Robin Morgan's evidence of Ted Hughes' tendency to be a "one man gynocidal movement."

We refused to let them read his drivel and the performance turned into a long, heated debate between us and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Quite a scandal, quite an exposure of Hughes and quite a good revenge on Sylvia Plath's behalf.

Robin Morgan wrote thanking us, saying; "The book - what can I say about my feelings on holding in my hand a reality brought about through the magick of an international feminist movement, brought about through your courage and work and commitment and love? We are half a planet away from each other, and still we are together, one, indissoluble, an energetic flow continuing in the current of our fore mothers."

She continued; "Take care of each other; cherish and guard your solidity and be vigilant as hell about the separations that creep in like radioactive dust, don't lose what you seem to have discovered, build on it."

At the same time we published a 'Radical Feminist Collection' of poems and articles. It was mostly very political and rhetorical in the style we excelled in at the time. It heralded the first appearance of creative lesbian writings. An exciting project we were thrilled to produce.

Painting-Up walls, advertisements and the like was one of our fortes. It began the memorable day Sharon did the first-ever lesbian graffiti in two foot high letters on the corner of Rae Street and St. George's Road Fitzroy. It said "Lesbians are Lovely". We kept repainting it whenever it was cleaned off until it became a permanent fixture.

Another lesbian paint up was done on the convent wall at the corner of the two main thoroughfares, Nicholson and Princess Streets. It was off by the next morning its outline only just visible on the cleaned bricks. It took the prize as the shortest lasting lesbian graffiti in our career. Lyndel recalls that the wording definitely implied that nuns were lesbians. Something like "Lesbian Sisters".

The word lesbian became a common sight, at least around the inner city haunts of the Radicalesbians. The police started claiming that they were collecting photos and could identify handwriting, or paint writing as it were, to pin the responsibility for signs on women caught.

Kidnapping was another illegality we indulged in when the Melbourne University Student Representative Council organised a big strip show as entertainment for the (male) students. We were outraged and decided to do something about it. We tried pulling the plugs of the electricity supply but that didn't work for long so we decided to kidnap the organiser, who was the

president of the SRC to teach him a lesson. (This man is still publicly visible in the education field in Victoria).

A group of us surrounded him, tied him up and threw him in the much-used Radicalesbian kombi van. We blindfolded him and drove around in circles to Argyle St. Fitzroy -where there was a household that was sort of our headquarters at the time. We sat him in the corner and all harangued him about how sexist he was. It went on for hours until the early hours of the morning - 3 or 4 am. During that time we baked biscuits and drank cups of tea without giving him any.

There was a dog there who hated men - as dogs brought up exclusively by women often do - and it kept barking at him right up near his still blindfolded face. We kept saying, relent or we'll set the dog on you and things like that. It was explained to him how strip shows oppress women. In the end he saw the error of his ways and apologised.

We made him promise to publish a public apology to women - which he actually did do. It was published in the student paper *Farrago* and I think some daily - like the *Sun* - picked it up from there and printed a report too. The strippers were quoted as saying that the men are all animals but we have to make a buck.

In the end someone drove the relenting organiser to somewhere out of the way and dumped him out of the car. We'd had a great time.

Kiss-In - Sometime during 1973 Gay Liberation organised a publicised public kiss-in at the City Square, in the interests of visibility. The mass media featured it and we handed out lots of leaflets, etc. I remember some teenage girls coming up to us and saying "But what do lesbians do?" They were given a rave about clitorises, etc. To which they responded with a dose of "Oh, yuk!"

Stickers - the Radicalesbian publishing industry extended to producing thousands of stickers. Originally, during the Gay Womany days we put out 'This Oppresses Homosexual' stickers. Then some 5 1/2 x 2 cm 'This Oppresses Women' stickers in purple. After a while we decided these weren't eye catching enough so did some 7 1/2 x 2 1/2 cm This Oppresses Women in shocking pink stickers. These of course appeared stuck over every advertisement, book, etc., we ever encountered.

Papers - Jocelyn and Laurie wrote a paper called 'Lesbian Oppression and Liberation' which was directed at The Left. I'm not sure where it was presented. It was a challenge to them about the discrimination against lesbians by such supposedly progressive groups. It said; Homosexual liberation is impossible under capitalism, but it is guaranteed under socialism...All oppressive power structures - racism, sexism and class - reinforce each other and only by changing all these structures will liberation be achieved".

The paper explained how lesbians are oppressed and why this is a backward, uninformed

and unjustifiable attitude. It also drew attention to the link between oppression of lesbians and women in general. It states that challenging sexist prejudices is a precondition of serious revolutionary change and emphasises that a mere intellectual commitment to change is not enough.

Lesbians Outreach - Meanwhile we were continuing our big lesbian meetings at the Women's Centre. Lots of women were being attracted to them. Including some of the more conservative lesbians, who were fairly hostile and baffled by it all. "But we were getting into this spirit of outreach... We thought we ought to reach out to lesbians and lead them to the light". (Jocelyn)

We did not sit well with the only other visible group of lesbians. This other group was more of an introduction agency than anything else. They were "a nice respectable group of girls". We called them the Quiet and Shys. They were also known as Claudia's Group.

Claudia was the woman who had set up the group. She was in charge and you had to be interviewed by her before you could go to a meeting - which was more of a social occasion. "I once went with some women I knew and they were asked never to come back." (Jocelyn) "Wasn't that because someone danced with someone else's girlfriend?" (Sue) "They were actually drunk, but she considered they must be on drugs because they were behaving objectionably." (Jocelyn)

Claudia was providing a valuable service for 'quiet and shy' lesbians who were finding it difficult to meet other lesbians in a discreet atmosphere. The criterion for being part of our group were probably just as stringent in a less articulated way. Unaware of this and filled with our particular brand of revolutionary righteousness we were rather contemptuous of the Quiet and Shys' lack of politics. Not to mention the fact that Claudia's hierarchical structure was the antithesis of our collective philosophy.

Originally, apparently, Claudia had wanted to name her group after a similar group in America called Daughters of Bilitis. When she found out that the American group had a sort of licensing system - you had to pay them money to use the name she declined to use it after an initial brief period of 'illegal' use. Jocelyn thinks that this group may have originated out of something called the Australian Lesbian Movement - of which I no information is readily available to my knowledge.

Women's Dances - originated out of the Radicalesbian group. We organised the first ever women's dance which was held on Friday October 5th at the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre in Napier Street. *Vashti's Voice*, the Women's Liberation Newspaper, reported; "About 200 women attended, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. A female rock group called the 'Mystical Misses' played and sang - really good music to which everyone danced - no wallflowers."

It was not a lesbian dance but one organised for the Women's Movement to which all sorts of women turned up, including the older women involved in Women's Liberation. The women's

band was 'a girl's band' who all had beehive, blonde hairdos and wore crinoline pants suits. They were incredibly startled by the nature of the crowd but got into the spirit of things and were quite pleased in the end with the good-natured atmosphere.

At the dance we mingled with all the women we were on roster with at the Women's Centre. A lot of the dancing was like Zelda the Greek, in circles with arms round each other's shoulders. Non-couple dancing. Sisterhood, rather than 'conning off', was very much the atmosphere. Helen Reddy's song 'I Am Woman' was kept for the end of the night as a sort of national anthem to which we all sang along with great gusto. It remained as the denouement of women's dances for some time.

"The second women's dance was at the Sports Centre at Melbourne University. Already it was basically young women and women taking their shirts off. The kind of community feeling went between the first and the second one. It became a dance type of dance instead of your cultural type of dance, whereby there were all ages and the dances were sort of tailored to all kinds of bodies. The first one wasn't everyone going kind of wriggle, wriggle free-style dancing. It was a lot of foot shuffle and stuff that you didn't have to be incredibly active in order to do." (Jenny)

"The dance was like the conference. Everything was quite different after the first dance. There were women's dances by the score - but they were never like that again." (Jocelyn)

The dance was more a celebration of our emerging culture than women out for a 'good time'. It was a very communal affair with an inclusive atmosphere in which all women could feel comfortable.

"On some occasions the Women's Ball, which has become a tradition, comes closest to being like that - it attracts the most incredible range of women." (Sue)

Universities - were then still ringing with the ideologies of liberation, anti-imperialism, anarchy, etc. Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation were vibrant young movements with large and growing followings which were highly visible - especially on university campuses. "It was the conservatives who were very much on the defensive. I wonder if I would now (in 1988), as I did then, walk around with a T-shirt saying, in large letters, 'I Am A Lesbian'."

The Universities provided important facilities for first the Gay Women's group and then the Radicalesbians. We used the finances provided by the University for Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation, and the roneo facilities, to print off our many leaflets and articles. We used meeting rooms and held dances there. We often had information tables up to make contact with women even though few of us were actually students there. I myself was never a university student - but made my first contact with lesbians through Gay Liberation at Melbourne University.

Yet, despite the facilities, finance and tolerance we found at the University there was also

opposition. I remember we ended up having to hire male security guards for women's dances held at the University because of marauding gangs of 'engineering students' who would try and invade, then hang round to attack women leaving the dances.

Psychiatry and psychology came under attack from us. I haven't got much detail of these actions. However I know we often went, as a group, to events like psychology conferences or psychiatric lectures which we found out about and waited for their usual derogatory mention of the illness of homosexuality. We would then leap up and eloquently harangue them about what rubbish they were talking. It was actions like these that eventually got 'homosexuality' removed from the register of psychiatric illnesses.

Camping - We did sometimes take a break from actions yet these became a sort of action in themselves. I remember going camping at Lerdeder Gorge a couple of hours out of Melbourne. We used the weekend for feminist guerilla training e.g. practising throwing rocks, etc. and decorated the camp with flags and banners - to the amazement of other bush walkers I'm sure. We weren't prepared to be invisible, even in the bush.

On the way to a bush camp once we were in a fish and chip shop carrying on a bit under the close observance of a gaggle of teenage girls. Before we left I handed them a written confirmation saying, 'Yes we are lesbians'.

Lesbian Farewells - as interstate contacts grew so did the phenomenon of interstate romances so part of our activities included regular trips down to the railway station or sometimes to the airport. Mobs of us would pile into our beaten up bombs together with flags, banners, song sheets and probably even leaflets - just to see off someone's lover who had come over for the weekend. To the astonishment of fellow travelers we would unfurl our political banners and flags, sing songs and conduct passionate farewells. The well known song "Those Lesbian Farewells" to the tune of Chatanooga Choo Choo originated at this time.

Pool - "As for Radicalesbians, all I can remember from those years is playing pool in seedy coffee shops in Sydney Road, Brunswick. I think we used to go off there after meetings. We would take over the tables and spend a few hours playing pool and chatting over cappuccinos. But as for the contents of the meetings, it's a bit of a blank. It must have gone subconscious in me, but I feel that a lot of my political stands were formed then, in those years. ... My pool playing days with Radicalesbians enabled me to beat my father in the first game of pool we ever played together, and that was great because he used to be a pool sharp." (Kaye)

Campaigning - there is a bit of merging between Radicalesbian actions and actions in which Radicalesbians were involved. We didn't draw sharp distinctions. Radicalesbians however did provide something of a call-a-crowd for any woman wanting action on an issue. We were ever ready to adopt and vent her anger.

The Polaris Inn was one such incident. A woman was told she couldn't drink in the bar of this hotel in Nicholson Street Carlton. This was the norm then but it was one that was soon to change. About 20 of us stormed into the bar and demanded to be served. A big brawl ensued during which I was mortified when I aimed my best kick of the night at a man wrestling with a friend of mind and contacted with her instead of him.

The police were called and 13 women were arrested. I remember that those of us who escaped the clutches of the law decided to follow the police wagons to see which police station they took the women to. It was a rainy night and I noticed someone following me. Thinking it was the police I tried to shake them off and eventually parked. It turned out to be another one of our cars who thought I was a police car they were following. All the same we did manage to find out where the 'sisters' had been taken and bail them out.

The whole incident and ensuing publicity during the court case in which Sharon, who was about 18, conducted a brilliant defence on behalf of everyone, made a lot of impact. There were some follow up actions in which a bus load of women would descend on a transgressing pub.

Sharon, recently when working with some students, found that they were quite surprised to find that once women weren't allowed to drink in bars. So it is an example of the changes we made now being taken for granted.

The Bradfield Campaign - in which many of us enthusiastically engaged is an example of another successful action. It was based on systematically defacing billboards advertising Bradfield cigarettes. It was a sexist ad saying 'Bradfield - not mild'. Directed at macho men. We changed it to say Not mild - but sexist. It was the first concerted anti-sexist advertising campaign of such a widespread nature.

It really caught on. Sharon remembers going to the pictures one night - and when the Bradfield ad came on the whole audience, unprompted, chorused "But Sexist". There was a lot of publicity in the media at a time when the concept of advertising being sexist was quite new. Eventually the brand was withdrawn from the market - crippled by the bad publicity and the expense of replacing billboards.

Maxwells - an electrical goods store in Melbourne city was using strippers to advertise its 'price stripping' policy. We demonstrated outside the store with leaflets everyday for quite a while.

Abortion Campaign - One of the examples of the altruism of lesbian dedication to the general fight for women's rights was our very high level of activism in the struggle to get abortion legalised. To show our ingenuity I will tell this story, which is too good to leave out. The pope had issued an encyclical condemning abortion and forbidding Catholics to support it. This was to be read out in all Catholic churches one particular Sunday. So we hatched a plan. We got out our best frocks, handbags, etc. (probably borrowed) and all met at the Women's Centre early that Sunday

morning. (That was the hard bit.)

We all got dressed up to look like good Catholics and rang up the media to give them a tip. Then we waltzed down to Melbourne's main cathedral and spread out in the crowd of genuine worshippers. There was an actual practising Catholic with us who had instructed us in the appropriate forms of behaviour, i.e.. cross yourself when everyone else does. To add to the aura of legitimacy I had borrowed a one or two month old baby. Unfortunately she declined to cry during the boring bits we had to sit through.

When the bishop read out his encyclical forbidding abortion we all stood up and walked out - to whispers from the rest of the congregation of "Not during the Sacrament!" As we emerged the T.V. cameras were waiting and I happily gave them an interview - as a Catholic mother who believes women have the right to choose and it's none of the pope's business.

It was a little surprise for my mother when she watched the news that night. My parents were Catholic but, like many others, supported abortion and were not so much shocked by that as they were to see a sudden potential grand daughter in my arms.

S.L.A. Lesbians - another television incident contrasts a little with that. In the 1970s there was a group called the Symbionese Liberation Army (S.L.A.) who were famous for kidnapping Patty Hearst, the media millionaire Randolph Hearst's daughter - and demanding millions be donated to feed the poor before they would release her. She was reputedly converted into being a revolutionary guerilla while with them.

They were eventually hunted down by the police. They holed up in a suburban hide-out and fought a big gun battle with the police. The house was eventually fire-bombed and they were all burned to death under spectacular television coverage.

It was a mixed group. But some of the S.L.A. women were lesbians and had written love poems to each other. So when they died we put death notices in the paper mourning their incineration by the American police state. (The philosophy of non-violent protest was not then current in Women's Liberation.)

There was a bit of a stir because the newspaper refused to print the word lesbian in the advertisement. Consequently a reporter tracked us down and persuaded us to appear on a national television current affairs program. I read a lesbian poem I had written mourning the death of these 'sisters'. So there we were on national television appearing to be lesbian guerillas. Though my guerilla activities had only extended as far as reading *Les Guerillières* (Monique Wittig) and driving the get-away car from a few 'Lesbians Are Lovely' signs, the interviewer later rang up and told us A.S.I.O. had asked her for our names and details

"My father rang up and said; 'How could you! Will you never stop!'" (Sharon)

My poor mother was working on the check-out of the little supermarket in the small town I grew up in and was faced with people coming in and saying; “We saw your Chris on television last night.” She talked to me on the phone and asked me in future to at least tell her when I was going to appear on T.V. so she would know what they were talking about and what to say. (Knowing that asking me not to go on television was useless.) I’m not sure how that fitted in with me being a Catholic mother. It seems sympathy for her potential embarrassment never unbalanced my commitment to revolutionary duty.

Naming - It was incidents like these which gave us a disincentive for naming our work. Though it was not the only reason:

“It’s a pity we didn’t date things and we didn’t sign things more. There was a positive move against putting your name to something most of the time. A denial of the individual because we were so conscious of working collectively. An individual was not important. The collective was the most important. Things did get lost in that process.” (Sharon)

We were also conscious of the secret police. Often women didn’t put their names on things publicly if it wasn’t necessary. We were coming out of the anti-establishment revolutionary era during which there were many violent demonstrations such as the anti-apartheid riots during the Springbok tours. The police and the secret police were working in fact hard to suppress any dissidents. We felt that we were included - and though not intimidated we were careful.

There were things you just didn’t mention on the phone. For example once some of us planned an action in which two women were to go out from the Women’s Centre in the early hours of the morning on a motor-bike and as they roared past a porn shop the one on the back was to throw a rock through the window. A group of us were gathered in the Centre as a support and back up group. Just before they were to set off some police came to the door. They claimed they were just checking up to see why someone was there at that hour - it being an otherwise deserted street of offices and factories. We told them we were having a meeting - at 3 am.

The mission was called off - and the appearance of the police was confidently put down to the fact that one indiscreet woman was known to have mentioned our plans on the Women’s Centre phone. We all felt a bit pissed off with her lack of conscious awareness, which was endangering our ‘revolutionary’ activities.

“It’s a pity we didn’t use pseudonyms or some such system so that you could pick a thread all the way through, of who’d done what and where. I guess we were so busy making history that we never thought of things like that.” (Sharon)

I remember some of us making up names and using names out of *Les Guerillières*, of goddesses and the like. We all took *Wicca* as a surname. It was a new idea then for women to change their names. It has become fairly common now - but then it was really innovative and we were pretty

pleased with ourselves.

Women's refuges - As I mentioned in the report of the conference itself some of the Radicalesbians were very instrumental in setting up the women's refuge called the Women's Liberation Halfway House, in Melbourne. Originally our idea was for a halfway house rather than a refuge. It was to be a place for women who were seriously considering getting more involved with Women's Liberation. A place they could use as a staging point in their lives while they made a break from the old. A sort of supportive, educational, communal, feminist home.

We planned to finance it and run it off our own backs. We did some public fund raising and the media got wind of it. They then seized on the angle of it being a refuge for battered wives. In my opinion their promotion of this angle was a major reason why refuges developed in that direction.

Naturally we were soon flooded with desperate women. Though a few women who came for help got involved politically, most did not. We did try to use the realities of women's lives, as exposed by refuges, to politicise people about women's oppression. However, instead of having a recruiting ground, we eventually found ourselves running a social service which only very indirectly raised women's consciousness.

Lesbians were also very central in setting up 'Elsie' - the first refuge in Sydney. It was through my connections with Sydney Radicalesbians that I got involved in the actual squatting of the first house that Elsie was established in and was one of the women who broke in to the Westmoreland Street house and spent the first few nights there.

Sydney - Unfortunately I haven't got much information to include on what was happening in Sydney at the time. I have few details of how the lesbians inter-acted with Women's Liberation or Gay Liberation- though I know that quite a few were lesbians were instrumental in setting up the first Women's Liberation Centre in Australia in Glebe Point Road.

A Radicalesbian Group did form there soon after the Sorrento Conference. I do have an extract from an old Women's Liberation Newsletter (Jan '74) which contains a report from Sydney Radicalesbians. It says:

"The Radicalesbians group has been going for a few months now but this is our first newsletter report.

Our aims are basically feminist ones. As women, and in particular, as lesbian women, we want to destroy the institutions of male culture which bind us and prevent us from finding and being ourselves. At the same time, we want to provide the alternatives to enable us to find and be ourselves and to counteract the male culture.

To work towards these ends, we alternately have action meetings and theory meetings on Thursday nights and separate consciousness raising groups. We have done, and are doing and are planning a number of actions. In December we held a conference at Minto. On February 3rd

we are having an information booth at the Domain, (“Everything you always wanted to know about lesbians but were afraid to ask”). We are having a jumble sale at Drummoyne Shopping Centre on February 16th to raise money. We are also holding a forum at N.S.W. University during orientation week.”

Amazon Acres - Women from the Melbourne Radicalesbian group interacted with the Sydney Radicalesbians in the setting up of the women’s land originally called Amazon Acres, near Wauchope in N.S.W.

Kerryn, one of the original Melbourne Radicalesbians, came back from a trip on which she’d been looking for land, saying she had found the most exquisite isolated mountain top retreat and that we should all come and have a look and buy it together. We mounted a mass expedition from Melbourne in a convoy of cars. We stopped in Sydney at the key household of the Sydney Radicalesbians in Crystal Street Petersham, to pick up more women.

We journeyed on to the newly discovered women’s paradise ‘Amazon Acres’ and all camped together in torrential rain and leeches. Nonetheless we decided to buy the mountain. New Year’s Day 1973-4 came up while we were there. We declared the date to be Day 1, Month 1, Year 1 in the new feminist calendar.

So the first women’s land was established. The mythology of which became a beacon to women all over Australia and the world. (Though it was probably only a new concept for modern white women.) From then on fund raising for Amazon Acres became another Radicalesbian activity.

Consciousness Raising - We did two kinds of consciousness raising. On the one hand we went out and talked to groups, including Women’s Liberation consciousness raising groups, about lesbianism.

On the other hand we formed our own small consciousness raising groups. “because we’d already got past the stage of universal solidarity and we were kind of griping about women who were being lesbians differently from how we were. Whereas at those first meetings it was about establishing what a lesbian was, for heaven’s sake.” (Jenny)

BREAKING UP

I don’t think it is possible to say when or how the Radicalesbians broke up. We just drifted slowly apart from 1974 on. Though, in another sense, many of us have maintained contact with each other and many of us have gone on and on working for women and for lesbians.

Like all groups we started having problems. “Robina brought up a lot about divisions and conflicts in groups at a stage when a lot of women were still coasting along on euphoria.” (Jenny)

Personally I remember the demise of the Radicalesbians as a fully cohesive and active group

coming about not so much through political conflict as from problems with personal relationships. This was a result of being both very idealistic and inexperienced about relationships. We thought we'd found The Answer - and suddenly there were a hell of a lot of questions. Like what do you do when you find you still feel jealous when you know it is ideologically unsound? We overstepped our abilities to cope with the non-monogamy philosophy.

We'd flown to the top of the stairs on the wings of discovery. The wind dropped and we fell to the ground - to slowly start working our way up the spiral staircase on our own two feet.

IN CONCLUSION

Finally I want to sum up this herstory with a personal analysis of the Radicalesbians. This is purely how I see it.

I think that we were just inexperienced, rather than politically naive. A lot of us came to the Radicalesbians with a strong awareness of the machinations of male power in things like imperialism, colonialism, racism, etc. Our feminism was taking our awareness of oppression one step further - into our personal lives. We felt that it was this step that would make our women's revolution the effective one.

This wave of feminism, of Women's Liberation, had its origin in women of The Left becoming aware of how the power plays of men were being acted out in their personal lives. Gay Liberation had its origin in the so called sexual revolution - which was breaking down expectations of sexual/social conformity. Lesbianism went from being an 'illness' to becoming a positive choice.

What I think we were unaware of is how hard it is to escape the psychological constructs, the conditioned habits, in our minds. They don't disappear over night once an intellectual awareness illuminates their presence. In fact it takes years and years of work, and is linked to the social reality of our lives. Monogamy together with its adjuncts - jealousy and possessiveness - continues to be an apt institution for providing the illusion of security in a continually insecure world.

'Coming out' was probably our main strategy. One we pursued with much determination, evangelism and courage. But we didn't think that that alone would change the world. We were committed to and fully prepared to act on our convictions at all times and with an enormous amount of energy. The personal being political came, for us, to mean that we had no personal lives. Our daily lives were constantly devoted to politics.

We felt frustrated by women who spent their time pursuing non-political pastimes. We believed that if everyone was as dedicated as us the women's revolution would happen soon. We were convinced that more and more women would see the light and join us and work with the same fervour we felt.

We engaged in a great variety of political actions, which we saw as steps in the dismantling of society as we knew it. If we'd known not everyone was going to follow they might have seemed futile, even foolhardy. Looking back now we can laugh at our conviction that a victory over one small town policeman was the first step in a victory over the entire police/military male power system. Or that kidnapping one bloke would lead to the end of strip shows. Yet at the time we were deadly serious.

There was a powerful heady sense of moving inevitably forward. This was precisely because we were so acutely aware of the extent of corruption in the male power system. We knew the foul tactics of murder, assassination, coups, starvation, torture, impoverishment, etc., that men used to consolidate their power, and especially their power over women, while invoking the name of democracy. We knew then that women would never win a meaningful liberation under either capitalism or communism or any other male determined 'ism'.

We felt women would see that men would never willingly surrender their power. This would make them into revolutionary women. We didn't have any specific tactics worked out, but would we have needed them if the initial inspired impetus had kept up and Women's Liberation hadn't dissolved into a multitude of factions arguing about what the correct tactic should be?

Women's energy turned from being primarily directed at the enemy to warring amongst ourselves. That may be an inevitable process that we all despair about, whilst all the while each contributing to it in our own way.

When the Radicalesbians were at a peak there were still so few of us, and we were still so overjoyed at having found each other and an ideology which both explained our sense of oppression and promised liberation from it, that our sense of sisterhood obscured any sense of tactics becoming a deeply divisive issue.

I think we thought that the way forward would become clear as we moved on. A lot of our actions were re-actions; smashing porn shops, closing down strip shows, disrupting homophobic meetings, etc. We thought if enough of us reacted strongly enough, often enough, to encountered instances of sexism we would eventually eliminate all of them. Some of this was pure anger.

Yet a lot of our actions were creative. We were creating a culture; originating women's dances, collections of lesbian writings, places for women to be, for lesbians to meet and grow in their self-awareness. Through widely distributing lesbian leaflets, painting lesbian slogans everywhere, going on television as lesbians, etc. we were creating a new tangible reality of lesbian visibility for the first time.

This was a potent brew which I think became diluted when lesbians became afraid to advertise their identity too much in case the feminist organisations they ran lost their government funding. That visibility is our lasting legacy which still needs a lot of building on. It is one I hope is never

POSTSCRIPT

This paper is still a work in progress. There is much more that could be written on this topic. From the first version presented in Adelaide to this one a number of contacts and new materials have been sent to me. The resources, though dusty and obscure, are there to be recovered.

The process of recording our past is important. Because it so easily disappears this process will be greatly aided in the future if women:

- * Date all leaflets, newsletters, etc. properly.
- * Name the groups or individual authors.
- * Keep records of meetings, including who was there.
- * Don't trust unaided old memories too much.
- * Take photos - they're great memory joggers.
- * Keep copies of everything you put out.
- * Don't rely on 'someone else' to record or save things.
- * Make wills! Leave your records and memoirs to the group you want to have them. Otherwise they will be destroyed and lost forever.