

Paris when printing apprentices, abused by the workshop master, given slops to eat and living in generally deplorable conditions, decided to make their grievances known in a particularly gruesome but spectacular way.

The master's wife, as was well-known in this part of the Latin Quarter, had a passion for cats — and for one in particular known as *la grise* (the grey one). *La grise* was the first to get the chop when the apprentices wreaked their revenge one fateful night. The rage caught on

and hundreds of cats were hunted down, put into sacks, and dumped in the workshop courtyard — where a mock trial was staged, sentences passed, and the cats hung. Much laughter and delirium followed, and master and mistress, awoken by the events, retreated in fear of mass insubordination.

The point of this obscure and gruesome story — and Darnton has many others — lies precisely in its obscurity and gruesomeness, and what historians can do with this. Darnton's work is concerned with

looking into these sorts of small, local and largely unknown historical episodes, finding out what made them significant for their time, and what they actively meant to the participants: it is about reconstructing the "mentality" of a given time and place. Part history and part anthropology, Darnton's work is fascinating for the insights it offers into questions of consciousness, culture and ideology frequently missed out or ignored in grander historical projects. Highly recommended, even for cat lovers.

## Feminists Take Stock

**WHAT IS FEMINISM?**  
edited by Juliet Mitchell  
and Ann Oakley (Blackwell 1986), \$18.95.  
Reviewed by JANNA THOMPSON.

After several decades of the women's movement it seems appropriate to evaluate our position: to examine accomplishments and failures, reassess the ideas and ideals which sparked the rebirth of feminism, to consider where we are going and what problems have arisen. The motivation behind *What is Feminism?* was, presumably, to make such an evaluation, and this is what the title of the book leads us to expect.

The editors admit in their introduction that the book did not develop as they planned and that many women who were expected to contribute did not do so. The end result is a hodge-podge of articles of uneven quality with few indications of an underlying theme. Many of the contributions are worth reading, but the reader who expects a systematic discussion of where feminism is at and what it has come to mean will be disappointed.

The contributions which most directly address the question posed by the title are generally disappointing. Rosalind Delmar in

"What is Feminism?" regards it as anomalous that feminism, which purports to speak for all women, is itself so divided, but she gets no further than to wonder (in the new language of deconstruction) if women form a coherent political or social grouping. Juliet Mitchell in "Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism" (a paper which she read on her last visit to Australia) considers whether changes favourable to women in the workforce aren't in reality part of the process of capitalist restructuring. Perhaps women are being used once more as shock troops to soften up the labour force for a new development in capitalism. Her thesis is provocative since it suggests that feminists have been playing into the hands of capitalism; but the social theory on which it depends is not articulated and her arguments are therefore difficult to get a grip on.

In "Feminist Theory and Feminist Movements", Nancy Cott discusses the opposition between feminism as a movement for individual freedom and as a movement which emphasises the ways in which women's needs and lives are different from those of men. This opposition has appeared in previous women's movements but, after pointing this out, Cott has little to say about it. Dale Spender's "What is Feminism?" is simply one more account of 'how feminism changed my life'.

By far the best theoretical contribution is Judith Stacey's "Are Feminists Afraid to Leave the Home?" (the original version appeared in *Feminist Studies* in 1985). She criticises the recent view of Germain Greer, Betty Friedan and Jean Bethke Elshtain, which she labels "conservative, pro-family feminism", and considers why some feminists have found them attractive and what this reveals about the inadequacies in the feminism of the '60s and '70s.

The other articles in the book are about specific social institutions — welfare, unions, health care, the law, science — and where feminists in various parts of the English-speaking world stand in relation to them. Of these, I found most interesting Heather Jan Maroney's "Feminism at Work". Her discussion of the growing militancy of women workers in Canada and attempts by women to work within unions suggests interesting parallels with what is happening in Australia.

People interested in feminism are bound to find some articles in the book useful or thought-provoking. What is doubtful is whether it's worth paying almost \$20 for a book which has no good reason for existing.

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