

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Elizabeth Wilson	<b>Date:</b> 05/11/19 <b>Age:</b> 83
<b>Key issues:</b> Sexism in academia. Gay Liberation. Women's Liberation. Radical Drag. Feminism. Political Lesbianism. Communism.	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Elizabeth was brought up in Exeter during the Second World War. She talks of her time at The University of Oxford and the sexism she, and the rest of the women there, faced. Elizabeth met her first proper girlfriend at Oxford; they got into the lesbian scene of the 1960s, which she characterizes as the 'Gateways' (arguably the most iconic lesbian bar in London of the late 20 <sup>th</sup> Century).  It wasn't until the beginnings of the Gay Liberation that Elizabeth became very political. She describes the tensions that arose within Gay Liberation, due to the sheer quantity and diversity of those involved. When feminist issues began to arise the majority of the lesbians formed a separate group and began attending Women's Liberation meeting as well. After 1971 many lesbians split even further from Gay Liberation and focused on groups within the Women's Movement; she describes how lesbianism became far more focused on as an issue in the Women's Movement after this.  Elizabeth became very involved with the Women's Movement; most prominently through her writings and published work. The two main campaigns she was involved with were the Abortion Campaign and the campaign for Women's Refuges. In addition to her activism and involvement in the Women's Movement, the Communist Party and Gay Liberation, Elizabeth also taught Cultural Studies at University of North London.  Elizabeth moves onto talking about her experiences in the modern day, and how she thinks attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have changed. She ends by discussing the current struggles that LGBTQ+ people face around the world, and how there are so many places that as a western lesbian she cannot visit due to persecution; she gives Chechnya and Russia as examples.	
	<b>Length of interview:</b> 1 hr

Evelyn: Right. So today we are recording an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London, and supported by the National Lottery Heritage fund. Today is the 5th of November 2019, and I'm interviewing the indomitable Elizabeth Wilson. So Elizabeth, could you start by telling me a little

bit about your early life, and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Elizabeth: Right. Well I'm not sure I agree with the sort of concept of who I really am, but-

Evelyn: Oh, well you can open that out for us.

Elizabeth: Yes.. Well I was born and brought up, my early life was spent in Exeter during the war in Devon, and my father was running a West African colony, so he wasn't there. And so I was brought up by my mother and her parents, and then after the war my parents got divorced, which was a tremendous sort of disaster for my mother because, I mean it seems so ridiculous now, but in those days a middle class divorce was a real shame. It was terrible.

Evelyn: It was stigmatized, wasn't it?

Elizabeth: Really stigmatized. It was really awful. And for some strange... I never understood my grandmother, really. She was a very strange woman, and very, very... She could never get over the fact that her father had been very rich. He was a rentier. I mean, didn't do anything. He just had lots of money, and then he lost a lot of it, and somehow her whole life seemed to be a sort of act of mourning for this loss of status, really.

And she married my grandfather who wasn't all that successful I suppose really, and she had this tremendous objection to divorce. So she persuaded my mother to refuse my father a divorce and just say she wanted a separation. I mean, it's all rather boring really-

Speaker 3: Oh, sorry.

Elizabeth: ... but it was significant for my mother. So my mother did as she was told. She was completely under my grandmother's thumb, really. And the consequence was that my father divorced her because he wanted to get married again. Which in a way was quite a reasonable thing to do really, because it was so irrational, this thing. She wouldn't give him a divorce as though she were a Catholic or something, but we weren't religious at all, so I've never really understood that, and I don't in a way understand any of it still.

But anyway, there was this tremendous feeling of kind of anxiety and agitation, really. My mother was terribly agitated, and the whole thing was, "Oh now we're so terribly poor," and I've always felt... Well I mean I suppose once I got into politics and so on this was all very embarrassing, because of course genteel poverty is not at all the same as being absolutely dirt poor.

I read Alan Johnson's autobiography, and they were really poor. They hadn't any money, and water was coming through the roof and everything, whereas we just lived in this kind of I suppose straitened circumstances in a way. I mean I suppose I was very spoiled really, and I had what I wanted and anything I wanted really, and private education, all that sort of thing.

And so in a way there was this sort of, well there was just this really sort of glum, depressing atmosphere all around my childhood, and I was pretty withdrawn I suppose really, and then I went to this school where nobody was a colonial administrator or whatever. There was no colonials there. I mean my mother had thought of sending me to Cheltenham, to Cheltenham Ladies' College. I'm sure I wouldn't have survived a boarding school, and probably, luckily she realized that.

So I went to St. Paul's, which was an extremely cosmopolitan school, and there were lots of Jewish girls there. So I was introduced to a completely different world really, which was the sort of cultural, sophisticated sort of cultural London world, and that quite alienated me from my mother in a way because she didn't come from that world at all.

I mean, she wasn't antisemitic in any way. Well I think she had a sort of positive stereotype of Jewish people that they were cleverer than other people, so that would be good, and some of their-

Evelyn: Possibly wealthier as well.

Elizabeth: ... cleverness would rub off on me so I would get to be clever as well. So really I was just, sort of became very rebellious really. Or this sort of hidden rebellion in a way, and I suppose I did have a sort of relationship with another girl while I was still at school, which all went horribly wrong. But I think it was more part of a general rebellion than any... I think perhaps if I'd been 10 years younger I might have got married really, and not really explored my lesbian side really.

But when I went to university at the end of the 50s, that was such... I mean university was really all about... I mean women were not given any space. Well, they were not treated seriously at all, really. And even all the sort of... There were female professors and lecturers and so on at Oxford, but they were all treated as jokes.

There was this woman Enid Starkie who was a lesbian in fact and well known to be. It was all quite open. Well it wasn't exactly open, but everybody knew. And she'd done work on Baudelaire, French poetry, so she was a real scholar. Published quite a lot and so on and so forth, but she was just treated as a joke. And in fact she made herself a joke in the end, because she used to dress up like a French sailor. So she'd wear this sort of white sailor's hat with a red pom-pom on it, and she drank.

And I think she'd had a long-time relationship with another woman at Oxford, and then this other woman whose name I can't remember had become principal or whatever it was, head of Somerville, and had been told that the relationship had to stop. So there had been a sort of sanction against their relationship when her partner became too well-known or too significant in the university.

And really Enid Starkie took to drink, and you would see her stumbling about the gutters in a drunken state. But this was all a big Oxford joke, really. I mean what was so awful about all this was this sort of way in which all these female dons were turned into a joke.

And there was another one. There was a philosopher don at my college who... And there were all these jokes about her, and she sets fire to her hair with her cigarette, or you go to her house and there are mice jumping in and out of the stockpot or whatever. So everything about women lecturers was abnormal really, or sort of eccentric. At best, it was eccentric really.

And the head of my college, the principal of my college gave this great speech. I mean she said, "Oh, we're training you to be diplomats' wives." And there was actually a whole, there was a whole debate going on in the educational world about whether it was worth sending women to college at all, actually. So we were a sort of anomaly really. It was quite odd. And there was a lot of restriction

on what you could do, and you had to be in by 11 and that sort of thing.

Evelyn: And that didn't apply to the male students?

Elizabeth: No. No. No, I don't think so. And I mean I had... I didn't know her then because we never met. There were a number of Roman Catholic girls at my college, and indeed at every college I'm sure, and they were kept well away in another place, and I never met any of them while I was there. And the one I did meet much later on, I mean I knew her later in life, actually got sent down because she was considered to be too rebellious and so on.

And I had another friend who got pregnant, became pregnant. Of course, she was sent down but her boyfriend wasn't, so there were all these massive inequalities that were so big really that you couldn't really... They were too big to take any notice of in a way, and-

Evelyn: [inaudible 00:09:55]

Elizabeth: ... the whole... And I think that..marriage really seemed very unattractive in a way, because a lot of these men were very dull. It was a very sort of complacent generation, I think. I think these blokes really thought they'd got it made, and they had in a way, and I met some of them later in life, you know. And some of my friends who did get married, I mean in a way they've stuck together sort of thing. Well not all of them have, but most of them stuck together, but you feel it was a very boring notion of marriage in a way. I mean they may not have felt it like that, but it just seemed very unattractive, and there didn't seem any way in which...

The only women I knew there who did go on, who were determined to have a career curiously enough were two women who read law, and they seemed determined to have a career, and they both married men who didn't mind that and carried on. And I don't know what it was about law that made them so... Maybe it was just there was more of a career structure, although I'm sure it's very difficult to get into. Or perhaps it seemed more rewarding than going and being a schoolteacher, or a probation officer or something. There was very little that was offered to you in the way of what you would do afterwards. Well I felt that. I'm sure there were things that might be more enterprising.

But anyway, so I think I felt quite disillusioned after a while. There was this whole myth, or it wasn't a myth, of the social life of Oxford. I mean there was a lot of it, and there were few girls and lots of men. Though of course much more recently I happened to meet somebody who'd been at Oxford when I was. We'd never met. And he said, which I sort of knew, and we knew when we were there as well that there was this other hierarchy, which was men like... He was a grammar school boy and he said, "Oh, we didn't dare go out with all you blue stockings. You were too posh for us, so we went out with au pairs and nurses and things."

And of course we'd known that there were a lot of, that there... And it always, "Well they're more sexy than we are. They're earthy." I think earthy was the word that used to be used. They're more earthy than us and they would go further, or go the whole way. And so it was interesting in a way to meet him so many years later, I mean just a couple of years ago, and he said that in terms of he didn't feel good enough to go out with people like me, whereas I have, in as

much as I knew about that when I was an undergraduate, I thought, "Oh, you know, they don't like us. We're too intellectual. They don't like intellectual women, so we're going to be blue stockings." And that, you know. So there was a whole lot of negative feeling about, or negative stereotypes about male-female relationships in a way. I mean I don't know whether that's a good way, not a very good way of putting it, but anyway.

And the other thing about Oxford then was really, certainly for men, it was really rather chic to be gay. I mean there wasn't a sort of hole-and-corner feeling about it. Well I'm sure there was for some men, but everybody knew men who were gay or this that and the other thing, and-

Evelyn: Something about the upper echelons of society-

Elizabeth: Yes. I mean it-

Evelyn: ... where it was absolutely tolerated.

Elizabeth: Yes. Yes. Well it was sort of all right.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Elizabeth: It wasn't you'll have... Well I dare say I'm sure it did happen, but it wasn't your father was going to kick your teeth in or something, or kick you out of the house or something, that sort of thing.

And then I met a woman, Mary McIntosh, who's dead now so I suppose I can mention her name. Well I'm sure she was very well-known and out anyway, so. And so we hit it off, and we formed a relationship, and then she went to America, but then she came back and we resumed the relationship, and got into the kind of lesbian world of the 60s really, which was basically the Gateways, really.

And so then I felt, well I think it was all mixed up for me. I think I could have perhaps gone either way as I said, but it was all mixed up with being independent and different, and kind of radical in a way. Being quite... Soon got in with sort of radical circles, but I don't think... I mean Mary's career was unusual in a way. She was unusual in becoming quite a well-known sociologist when sociologists were all men almost. There were hardly any women in that area, and so she was the exception in a way. And I slightly sort of tagged along behind her, because I was being a social worker at that time.

And then I suppose it wasn't really until gay liberation that... Well neither of us had been terribly political. I mean when we lived in Leicester for a couple of... Well she taught at Leicester for several years, and I was there for a couple of years. There was a campaign that was generated within the university originally, which was to get all the immigrants to register to vote, so it was this registering thing, and so that was the sort of political activity that was going on. And of course the Labour Party was doing quite well at the end of the 60s and so on, so. And we weren't so interested in the Labour Party really.

And then all of a sudden gay liberation sort of took off. But really I've gone beyond... I mean, what you said I should be talking about was my childhood really, so I've moved on from that.

Evelyn: Oh well. Life does move on in that way. That's absolutely fine. So I'm interested in the early days of the Gay Liberation Front.

Elizabeth: Yes.

Evelyn: Can you give us a flavour of the excitements, the emotions, the trepidations?

Elizabeth: Well I think really, I have to say, I think that in a way that year it only... Gay liberation, which was essentially, it was largely men, masculine, was probably the most hilarious thing that ever happened. It was a complete kind of sending everything up into the air really, and I'm rather shamefaced to say, but when the women's movement first came along Mary and I were a bit dismissive of it, because it seemed to be all about women who had children, so we didn't have children, and I'm afraid the attitude then was a bit sort of, "Well they didn't have to have children." So I mean we're not very interested in the problems, enormous problems mothers were having. Especially educated mothers. The whole Betty Friedan thing. So we more took to gay liberation, which seemed more directly relevant to us really, and I just think for the men it was just this huge camp explosion, really. And so anything was possible, and all these madcap things, and then people would get arrested for trivial reasons, and then there'd be trials, and everybody would send up the trial, and everything was a sort of camp joke in a way. And-

Evelyn: It sounds like a lot of fun.

Elizabeth: It was great. I think it was, in a way, I think probably the most fun thing I've ever done in a way, because it... And of course it couldn't sustain itself, and there were enormous fights and rows about the interventions by left groups, socialist groups, and that caused enormous friction. And then there was a whole thing about radical drag, which we didn't relate to so well, and-

Evelyn: So perhaps you might explain radical drag for our listeners.

Elizabeth: Well the idea of radical drag was just that it would break down a gender barrier, so it was an attempt to attack gender stereotypes. And radical drag was you wouldn't try to be glamorous. These men wouldn't try to be glamorous. They'd just look like sort of worn out housewives or something, so they'd [inaudible 00:19:30]. So it was quite funny in a way, but of course it was very superficial also. And I remember, then Mary and I had separated but we remained quite close, but then I had a new partner, and she and I went out in a car. We must have been doing spray painting or something. Doing some vaguely radical activity with about three men in this car. I think there are five of us in the car. And anyway, and one of them, what's his name? Alan, I think. He was wearing this sort of housewife's drag and so on. But it's just an example of how superficial this gender bending was, because we were stopped by the police, and they said, "Yeah, what are you doing?" And Alan lept out of the car and said, "I'm Dr. Alan so-and-so." Immediately took a huge male privilege. Rested it back very quickly. And there were enormous disputes and rows, and because it was all so new really, and I think there were a lot of... There were some gay men who all thought they didn't like women, or didn't want to bother with women at all really, and weren't interested in women. So when feminist issues started to come up, some of them weren't interested in that at all. And we went, and there was a big... So we formed a lesbian group within gay liberation. A small group. And then we went to a women's liberation conference, which was held at Skegness in a big miners' holiday home in Skegness. And at that time... Oh, it's very

complicated. I don't know. At that time, briefly, by some extraordinary means the women's liberation movement, which was quite an open movement, had somehow been hijacked by this very small group of Maoists. There were just six of them. Four men and two women. Two married couples. And they were just absolutely appalling, and they'd somehow got a grip on, only very temporarily, got a grip on the women's movement.

And so this conference was supposed to be all organized around Marxist, Leninist study groups, and we were all told what to do and everything. And so the lesbian group, we decided we weren't having this. We didn't want to do this, so the women's movement must be won back for a kind of democratic socialism or whatever, and so we managed to disrupt the whole thing, so there was endless disruptions of the conference.

But what was also happening was in this big place there was also an international socialists group, which was a sort of vaguely Trotskyist group. And there was a miners' group.

Evelyn: Oh, gosh.

Elizabeth: There were actual miners there having some sort of weekend or something. So this engendered... So we had a little stall with our lesbian stuff, and of course so all the IS people would come creeping along to see if it could be won for the Trotskyist revolution, so they were all interested. And then of course all the miners were interested, oh you know, in a sort of rather prurient way were quite interested in all this, so it generated a lot of interest quite apart from all the Maoists freaking out.

And then actually on the Saturday night the miners actually had a stripper, and there nearly was a sort of enormous bust-up about that, and there was sort of... We tried to form a chain to, I don't know whether it was to stop the stripper getting in or what it was, I can't remember. It all got quite nasty. But eventually the security managed to calm it down and separate us all, and I think actually they did have the stripper, but anyway. So this was all very exciting, and it-

Evelyn: What year, sorry? What year was this happening?

Elizabeth: The would have been 1971.

Evelyn: '71, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yes, it must have been autumn 1971 I think. And that really sort of... So then the lesbian group reported back about that to Gay Liberation, and then we were all very miffed because Gay Liberation was not very interested, so at that point most of the lesbians split off, more moved into the women's movement and began to form lesbian groups in the women's movement, or just be in the women's movement. And lesbianism then got much more raised as an issue in the women's movement.

And I think actually it struck me recently that that generation, those gay men, I still see some of them. Lots of them are dead of course, but I still see some of them, and I feel that's remained the highlight of their political life really, and that generation of gay men don't seem to have moved into the left in the same way as the women did. It seems to me quite a significant difference.

I mean, it's not true now. I mean, in Camden Labour Party there are lots of young gay men, and in fact there are young gay Tories all over

Camden as well, so it's there's no... That they have younger men don't feel, but somehow that generation just felt... Perhaps the whole experience of the way there was attempts to infiltrate the gay, get everybody to be in IS or something or the other. Maybe that put them off. But they have never, never really moved in, that lot.

Evelyn: Or aligned themselves with particular...

Elizabeth: Jeffrey Weeks has. He would be a bit of an exception in a way I feel for that.

Evelyn: Yeah. very much on the left.

Elizabeth: And I notice it. So what I feel, one of my things that quite annoys me really now that now in Camden I'm more oriented around the Labour Party. It will never be my ideal party really, but anyway. And I know a lot of women I've known for a long time in the women's movement, and we're all really in the same place now, given the situation and everything it's sort of changed. But I feel really... And then I'm in a reading group as well. All these heterosexuals are incredibly unknowing, particularly about male gay sexuality... They've all had... Because lesbians moved into the women's movement, and then they all moved into Labour Party or the Communist Party or something, so lesbianism has become normalized for all these straight people in a way that I feel male homosexuality hasn't been. And most of them don't know any gay men, actually.

And it's a continual source, well not a continual, but it's a recurring source of irritation to my partner and me that there's this sort of, "Oh, you know." And, "Oh, well it's all all right now," sort of thing, and just complete lack of understanding really. And certainly in my reading group, we've read quite a lot of books and stuff about, that feature gay men in one way or another, and they always display an extraordinary sort of cloth-earedness about it, really. But anyway, that is how it panned out, and gay liberation eventually sort of exploded itself really, and broke off into all these other groups and so on.

Evelyn: Splintered, yeah.

Elizabeth: And I think went through a rather misogynistic phase in a way. I think the result of that was, "Oh, we'll go off and do our thing if you want to go and join the women's movement." And so yes, I joined those groups in the women's movement, and particularly I was in a group that ran this magazine called Red Rag, which was formed by a group of women, some of whom were Communist Party members, and some of whom were not, who were non-aligned, and that was always a cause of friction. But it brought out, it was quite fruitful in a way about what was the... Well, it lead to all sorts of those theoretical debates about what's the origin of women's oppression and so on and so forth, and in a rather curious way.

I mean I think in a way I sometimes feel it was a bit of a pity that so rapidly feminism got into the academy, and it became women's studies in a way, and everybody thought that was a very good thing, and I suppose it was. But it did have the result of it all became incredibly theoreticist really, and over, and I think contributed to a feeling among some women that it was all so highfalutin, and middle class doesn't even really explain it. You know, that it was-

Evelyn: In the realms of theory rather than practice.

Elizabeth: Yes, yes, than lived experience and so on. And so there are inevitably all those tensions all the time.



Evelyn: In the early times within the women's movement, I know that the lesbian contingent was quite a strong core. Were there any tensions, or what was the dynamic between the lesbian and the straight women within the movement?

Elizabeth: Well I think, I mean I think at the beginning it was more there was a sort of worry about it among some feminists. We don't want to be labelled as lesbians. I mean, "Oh the whole movement has been labelled as lesbians," and it's not. You know, it's not.

Evelyn: Because it's supposed to be anti-men I suppose [crosstalk 00:31:01]-

Elizabeth: Yes, exactly. Yes, it's anti-

Evelyn: ... viewed from outside.

Elizabeth: ... [crosstalk 00:31:02] so you're all man haters. You're man haters. And then that sort of diminished, but then I think there were periods more in the 80s really early, the whole thing about every woman should be a lesbian.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Elizabeth: So then there was another side of it, which was hostile to any sort of, or dismissive of any sort of heterosexual experience women might have. And then on the other hand, another irritating thing was women who were trying to be lesbians and weren't really. You know, so that you're-

Evelyn: Yes, I think this is a very strange dynamic that I have heard something of.

Elizabeth: Yes. Yes. And there was, "Oh, I'm a lesbian." And, "Oh." And you would hear a lot about how they were a lesbian and so on, and then next thing they'd gone off with some boyfriend. So there were little irritations like that that didn't help, and I think also in the 80s the whole thing about pornography was very negative, and kind of in a way I think destroyed it as an ongoing coherent organization, because there was such a divide. And the anti-porn movement was so... It was this idea that pornography has caused men's oppression and women's oppression, as if it was only the birth of pornography that had created everything, and it was so overdetermined.

Andrea... Oh what's her other name? Andrea. Anyway, she was this famous, enormously huge, tremendously dynamic speaker who so powerfully influenced everybody, so it did become, well it became totally split really between that position and then what were called socialist feminists, and there was much more about working with left groups or working with the Labour Party, though the Labour Party was very backward really. So Angela and I were in the Communist Party for a number of years. I really liked the Communist Party actually, but everybody's forgotten about it now. But-

Evelyn: And what was their position towards lesbians in particular? Women in general I suppose was a more-

Elizabeth: Well of course I'm sure formally the position had been it's a sort of bourgeois mistake. It's a part of bourgeois decadence, so it will go away when we have socialism. But I think there was an increasing recognition that that wasn't the case, and feminism was accepted in the Communist Party.

I mean it was largely people like the journalist Bea Campbell was quite to the fore in writing about it and trying to insist it was taken seriously, but she wasn't the only one. There were a lot of women in

the Communist Party, and one thing they did was co-found this magazine Red Rag, which was part of that coming between being the Communist Party collaborating or being with feminism outside the Communist Party, so it sort of widened things up.

And there was immense resistance, and there were always problems, and then you heard about big trades union figures who was a wife beater or this that and the other. There were all sorts of tensions and so on, but I don't think it was entirely unsuccessful. And they made a valiant effort to kind of incorporate gay men as well, I think with less success. I think a more thoughtful communist could absolutely understand women's oppression as part of a wider picture that they had of things, whereas I think gay men were a bit harder to see there being any reason for that really, or perhaps it was just an aberration that would go away.

But they did their best, I think. But of course they were totally, totally... The Communist Party really was a complete hiding to nothing because it could never get over Stalinism. I mean it wasn't a Stalinist party by the time it closed up, but it could never get away with that. It was completely hopeless really.

Evelyn: Yeah. Overshadowed by that.

Elizabeth: Yes. It was completely, and was always bound to be really. Yeah, so... Yeah.

Evelyn: So you were very active in the women's movement. What were the big campaigns that you were involved in?

Elizabeth: Well I think looking back on it, I wasn't really an... I'm not a natural activist at all I don't think really, and actually in the end mostly what I did was writing stuff, really. I mean, I really wasn't an organiser. I was sort of just go along and be a foot soldier when other people were organising things. So I did stuff with the abortion campaign. I mean, well everybody did. You would be... And I got involved in battered women, women's-

Evelyn: Women's refuges.

Elizabeth: ... refuges. And I suppose those are two of the things I was more involved in.

Evelyn: And were you involved with the YBA Wife campaign?

Elizabeth: Not really, no. A lot of my friends were, but by that time I was trying to move away from social policy really. And once I'd written one book about that I really wanted to write about other things, so I wasn't so involved in that. And then later on I was involved in Feminist Review. We started a journal that was more academic really, but yes, I... What was I? I can't remember so much what I was involved in.

It just seemed it was a world unto itself actually, the women's movement. So everything you did, I mean I never left the day job, but everything worked together, so in a way in the early years social work all got radicalised. So there was a radical social work, and that Case Con, I was involved in running that magazine for quite a while.

And then once one was in the Communist Party there are other things you did then for that as well. So I would do a certain amount of canvassing and campaigning and stuff for them as well.

Evelyn: Busy days.

Elizabeth: Well yes. Yes, it was extraordinary really, and a guy I know wrote a whole, or edited a whole book of entries from people's diaries for

the whole of the past 100 years, so it was this big book. And he asked me if I'd read, kept a diary, and I did keep a diary in the 70s. And I sort of looked up this old one, and I thought, "Good god. How can I do all this all the time?" So there's this entry about sort of, "Oh, I went to work, and then I went to see students somewhere in a placement, and then there was a National Front march in Islington so we all went to that, and then I went something else to the magazine and this that and the other thing."

And I sort of read about a whole week or a couple weeks into it, then it said, "Oh, today is the first day I haven't felt exhausted." I'm not sure [inaudible 00:39:32] I'm not surprised I felt exhausted, because one did get through a lot really, one way and another.

Evelyn: And was there time for a social life at all, or was it all rolled into one?

Elizabeth: Well again you see I think it was all rolled into one. So there would be all these feminist dances, and feminist weekends and conferences, and so life was much more seamless in a way.

Evelyn: What would happen at a feminist weekend?

Elizabeth: Well you would all sit about talking, and there would be campaigns, and then at night there'd be a dance, or there might be some kind of cabaret. I don't remember performance being a tremendous part of it actually. There were bands. There were women musicians sometimes. Yeah, but mostly I just remember, yes, there would be dancing in the evening, and there would always be food. Usually vegetarian, which I didn't really like very much, but it was just one seamless thing in a way.

Evelyn: Just one long party.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well no, not one long party. One long sort of-

Evelyn: Some bits were serious, some bits were...

Elizabeth: Yes, one long sort of thing really.

Evelyn: Yeah. But was it good to be in women's spaces mostly?

Elizabeth: I didn't really care about that actually.

Evelyn: No.

Elizabeth: No. I didn't care about all that. No, I mean actually when there was the GLC [Greater London Council] place in the 80s I used to go along to that, but actually that had men as well, the GLC place, so it wasn't specifically a women's space. No, I never felt the need for a women's space really. I don't know why not.

Evelyn: So you said you moved out of social policy.

Elizabeth: Yes. Yes, I sort of managed. I mean, it was the advantaged of being at UNL [University of North London], at a sort of... I mean it was a disaster really that the polytechnics were all turned into universities, because it sort of destroyed them without creating a level playing field or anything. But the result of being there was I could work myself around. I didn't have to... If I'd been at a very prestigious university I'd have had to stick to my subject. It would all have been much more organised really, but I just would go off and research something else, and it was before all the days of you have to get grants to research things.

And all my friends now who are still in academia and who used to write books, they don't do any of that anymore. All they do is they're

bidding for grants all the time. So it has changed a lot, but in the 80s it was, as I said, it was quite possible to gradually work your way round back to cultural subjects really, which was really my main interest, consumer society really I suppose.

Evelyn: And so it was cultural studies that you were teaching at UNL?

Elizabeth: Eventually, yes. Yes. Yes, because of course it was created. That became a trendy thing to do, so I managed to move into that.

Evelyn: And what were the most fascinating parts of that for you?

Elizabeth: I don't know really. I just think that I just like the tangible world, really. I mean I'm very much against that... There is a kind of, perhaps it's a bit British in a way, but I think it's, well I suppose eventually, really it's puritanical, but I hate this idea of the inner self is the true self and outward things are unimportant, and I think that's completely wrong.

And I had an argument with somebody about Jo Swinson the other day, and I said, "One dreadful thing about her is her dreadful sweater dresses." And my friend said, "Oh, that doesn't really matter, Elizabeth. It doesn't matter." And I said, "Well unfortunately it does matter." But I mean I think the visible is the real.

That's why I like Japan, because the Japanese, to them all ritual and outward things are what reflects the soul really. It's not that there's something inner and better, and there's this outward dress that we shouldn't be worrying about. And quite a lot of my socialist friends are quite like that really. They're not the gay and lesbian ones I suppose. Yes, I suppose, yeah. So yes, I just wrote about what I liked writing about or was interested in, and really it was what I read about fashion that chimed, I mean in a rather questionable way chimed in with this new interest in consumption, and could be sort of brought in.

Oh well you know, it's fine for women to be interested in fashion after all as a way almost of validating quite traditional notions of femininity, which wasn't really what I was meant to do or was interested in. It's all all right now. We can all be lipstick lesbians or something. I mean, it's very easy the way that things get turned into something much more conservative than you thought they were going to be, but it hit a nerve somehow, or it just... Like those things do or don't. It occurred at a moment when people... I suppose a more wider thing there was much more interest in consumption really, as is probably quite right because we live in such a consumerist society.

Evelyn: So over time I'm looking at back towards '67 when the Sexual Offences Act came in. Obviously that was directed to men, even though women were suffering from all the same discriminations, save actual imprisonment. There's been successive, speedy and successive legislation since then. Do you personally feel that you've felt the impact of that, and whether it's perhaps also brought with it attitudinal change?

Elizabeth: Well I think first of all I don't think it was... I mean I think that the whole notion of lesbian oppression was different. It was really that you were eclipsed, or you weren't worth thinking. Men were dangerous but women, lesbians were just were pathetic or not worth thinking about really, so it was a different kind of thing. A sort of passive oppression really.

Evelyn: It's a bit like the days back in Oxford where they were a joke. Not a threat. Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yes, exactly. Yes, it's that you're not even worth thinking about. Yes, you're not a threat, you're just oh forget it. I mean, I personally, I think that the changes in legislation are very important. Significantly and obviously the age of consent and all that most only affected men, but I think it was very significant in creating changes in attitudes. I think attitudes have at least superficially changed.

I personally am not at all keen on gay marriage. I mean, I don't see why people want to be married. I thought marriage was something I was trying to get away from, and it quite irritates. People come up to you and say, "Oh yes, oh, are you and Angie married now?" And I was like, "No, I don't want to be a husband. How can I be a husband?"

And people always want a sort of... When Angela's child was born, some friend, I mean it was mostly straight ones I must say, all this thing, "Oh what are you to it? You have to be something nameable to this baby. So are you her auntie?" And the same people said, "Oh, you're like a father to her." So there would always be an effort to sort of corral a unique relationship into something that's already existed, and I suppose it's a sort of human trait really.

So I personally, I know a lot of lesbians and gay men are very pleased with the whole marriage thing, but I personally could not care less really. I'm just not interested in it really. I mean, I can see it is a good idea to be on the level playing fields again. So what I think and my actual reaction are two different things in a way, but yes. I don't know why relationships have to be brought into these categories in a sense. All relationships are unique really, and trying to impose a kind of husband-wife template onto relationships between members of the same gender seems rather unnecessary really, but I know lots of people don't agree with that, so...

Evelyn: Do you feel like attitudes have changed, or do you feel it is a very superficial thing? Or are there pockets of real change and pockets of old school attitudes?

Elizabeth: Well I don't know. What do you think? I suppose the latter. I mean I suppose it's a bit like Brexit. Half the population is quite cool with gays and lesbians and LGBTQ and everything, any old thing, and the other half isn't. And I think we live in such a divided society, and it's become quite disruptive really. And it's almost sometimes, all these remoaners and people who don't like remainers, it all seems to be an attack on education almost. That only poncy people who've got a degree. And I'm sure it's not really that, but you know. And then gay and lesbian would be all part of the ponciness in a way, and pretentiousness almost, and-

Evelyn: It's that London bubble

Elizabeth: Yes, yes. Exactly sort of writ large. So I feel there is... I think it is a bit superficial. I mean there were those two women who were attacked on the number 31 bus, my local bus. So you can't say that everything is lovely.

Evelyn: In the garden is lovely. No.

Elizabeth: Everything in the garden is lovely. But of course it's partly a reaction to there being much more openness that then there's much more to attack, really. And I have two men friends, one of whom is Brazilian, and they say, "Oh well when we go back to Brazil we'd never hold hands, or we'd never touch each other in public," and so on. So there

are... And Brazil is a society which is supposed to embrace LGBTQ too, even under the present regime, and obviously doesn't other than at a very superficial level.

But I mean I suppose what can you say except constant vigilance really? I mean I suppose that people... Things go in waves, don't they? I mean I never would have thought that in the 60s when religion seemed to be disappearing, gratefully, I would end up in a society in which a large number of women feel they have to cover themselves up completely, or otherwise they're going to be tempting men to sin or something. So that would have astonished me in 1970, and it's just something you have to... These things come in waves don't they, really?

Evelyn: Pendulum swings.

Elizabeth: Yes, and I'm sure that will change again eventually. And I suppose really that when people feel insecure there are lots of things that make them feel insecure, or worse, and then they want to hit out at it, and I suppose that I think some of the negative feelings about transgender is that if you don't feel very secure in yourself, any kind of ambiguity is quite disturbing really. And what are you meant to think about it? And so it comes to be an attack on you, almost. So when you're attacking the transgender person it's really because they've attacked you as you feel. It's like Hitler and the Jews, really. He felt they were attacking him. It's a sort of paranoia isn't it really that affect how people think of things.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). People like things to be very black and white. Certain.

Elizabeth: Black and white. Yes. And some people-

Evelyn: People love binary.

Elizabeth: Yes, and some people can tolerate much more ambiguity than other people sort of thing. Yeah.

Evelyn: So when you were thinking about popping in here to have an interview with me, was there anything that you had on your mind that you thought you might like to say that we haven't touched on?

Elizabeth: Oh. I don't know. Let me just think of that for a minute. I don't think I was... I don't know really that there is. I mean it so happens it has coincided with... I've got a whole lot of essays and articles that I wrote that I'm now trying to... I mean, that mostly were published, that I'm now trying to get into a book, which has a theme, which is about how research is itself quite subjective. I mean it can be valid and objective, but the reasons for any given person doing research will have a subjective element.

Evelyn: Of course, yeah.

Elizabeth: So I've been thinking about that really, and so it probably isn't terribly relevant to this interview, but I think what it's... I think it's sort of given me a slightly guilty feeling of really that I've led the life of Riley, really. I've been a lily-of-the-field, and I've done what I wanted to do for a large part of my life. And I feel rather guilty about that, and I feel that my... It's true my childhood was not at all happy, and my relationship with my mother ended up being very bad, and I feel very sad and guilty about that, but I mean on the whole I've done a lot of what I wanted to do, and I haven't really...

I remember a woman in a woman's group I was in, when there were those things about, "Oh, well you're not a working class lesbian, or

woman, or feminist, or anything." And I'm not working class, and she said this thing, "Oh, when I was a child we never had a fruit bowl on the table." Whereas I thought I never thought whether there was or wasn't a fruit bowl on the table. Do you know what I mean? I mean that was just not a level of poverty that... So we obviously weren't that poor. My mother owned a house and everything, or my grandparents did. So I sort of, yes, I've ended up feeling...

I mean I happen to be doing this at this moment, so that's what made me think about that, that... But it's all more and more threatened. I mean I feel like I've spent my whole life sitting on the edge of a volcano, really. I mean, I lived through the war. Nothing happened to me in the war, and you feel that the areas of safety are all shrinking, and there's a very... It feels more and more like a kind of bubble. I mean not a remoaner bubble or a Westminster bubble, but a bigger bubble that is more and more encroached on. So there are more and more places people...

We went to holiday in Tunisia and all sorts of places. Turkey indeed I wouldn't want to go to now, actually, and we never went to Syria and we'll never go there now. So looking at it from that very touristic point of view, the world is getting to be a more dangerous, more and more dangerous place, and more and more countries seem to be in the most terrible turmoil. I mean tourism was never the answer anyway, but-

Evelyn: No, but yeah.

Elizabeth: ... you know what I mean.

Evelyn: That's just a practical example.

Elizabeth: It's that subjective feeling. "Oh look, there are all these places I can't go to now, or I wouldn't want to go to, and that horrible things are happening to people there." And yes, I mean I don't know, that's not really relevant to anything, or certainly not this.

Evelyn: No, it is, because the LGBTQ community is threatened in so many countries. This-

Elizabeth: Yes, I mean what was horrible is the whole Chechnya thing, actually. And Russia, a friend of ours made a film about Lorca and the Spanish Civil War, and this was shown in Russia, and she said, "When we were in Russia, what had to happen was we were just..." Her and her partner, her girlfriend. "We just were told to come to a certain place at a certain time. So we came and other people came." And they were all in there and it was sort of closed session, and the film was shown, and then they were told afterwards, "Don't leave all together. Just leave in ones and twos, and don't all leave at once because otherwise you might be set upon," and so on. So the whole situation in somewhere like Russia has got worse and worse really. So I think we are very lucky in Britain, but it isn't, well it is a very much case of continual vigilance, isn't it I think. And...

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And this is part of why we are recording these interviews.

Elizabeth: Well of course, yes. Yes. Yes.

Evelyn: For younger people to understand their history and where things can go.

Elizabeth: Yes, because I mean it's, and again it's analogous with the whole Holocaust thing, isn't it? I mean it is shocking that lots of people don't think the Holocaust happened. It's extraordinary really.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elizabeth: So I'm sure, yes, I'm sure that-

Evelyn: Well-

Elizabeth: ... there is the same level of ignorance, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: Finally, thinking of that young Elizabeth in that rather glum household, what would you say to her?

Elizabeth: I think it's not as bad as you think it is. Yes. Yes, I think, yes, don't be so down on yourself, or don't be so... Yes. Yes, I think... Yes, real life will happen. Something real will happen eventually. Because it does, doesn't it? I always thought, "Oh, nothing will ever happen. I'll never have a partner of whatever sex or anything, and I'll never have a job or no job I want to do." There's no need to be so depressed.

Evelyn: Well it all did happen.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well in a way, yeah.

Evelyn: And you have a wonderful partner, and have had some great jobs, and an amazing life. So I'll just say thank you so much for sharing it.

Elizabeth: Well thank you for asking me to. It's such an important project isn't it? I feel it's very important.

Evelyn: Well, I hope so.

Elizabeth: Yes, yes.

Evelyn: Thank you.