

The last words in my last book are 'THANK YOU'. I have so much to be thankful for: that I was the daughter of journalists and a newspaperwoman from aged 17, that my husband, friend and love of my life was a newspaperman, and that, aged 50, I started to turn the Guardian Women's Page into a place where readers could meet and talk, and take steps to make women's lives better.

Look at the painting in the National Portrait Gallery*. There we all are – in 1994 – when I was already 87 and crumbling! Jill Tweedie, gone now, Liz Forgan, Posy Simmonds and Polly Toynbee - still flourishing! – and me in my big specs, cardi and comfy trousers. Still plain, as when a child.

The sharp smell of the ink was in my nostrils from birth. I told my dolls, 'I have to go and write some copy now!' We were Liberal; my hatred for all discrimination, my pacifism started young, but in 1929 I rose early to vote for the first time – Labour - in a red dress!

At 17 I was a copy holder on our local Leicester Mail; at 19 they offered me the Women's page and I wept! Wanted to be a real journalist. Women's pages then – all woollies and jellies. I loved the editing, the hands-on creating of the paper. My first piece was a report on 'Miss Constance Hardcastle's Pupils' Concert'! Looking back, you see connections – music has been a constant joy in my life - in singing the whole persona is involved - and I like to think I've given women a voice - ... but I'm getting ahead.

When I got a job in Bolton my father wrote, 'I should like to see you in a bigger place than Bolton. If you could manage the Guardian I should be so proud of you.' Sadly he was not alive in 1957. From 1933 until the end of the War, I was at the Co-operative Press in Manchester, doing everything for the women's and children's publications. I met K. Stott – he was never Kenneth or Ken – of the News Chronicle, and was 'liberated' into our wonderful marriage. In '43 our daughter was born, and he was away in the Navy for two years. I'd say – you'd say - 'juggled', with the help of family.

In 1945 I landed Deputy Sub-Editor on the Manchester Evening News – joy! - and K wrote, planning our future: ‘Your job now is quite as big a factor as mine.’ How I miss him still.

At last, the Guardian. To welcome me: a new blotter, a portable type-writer, a paste pot and a beautiful pair of long scissors. On the page I got other women talking, not just professionals like Lena Jeger, Shirley Williams, Marghanita Laski, but women writing in about their lives now as wives, mothers, daughters, widows, workers. Articles or letters led to the creation of – well! - the Housewives’ Register, the Invalids at Home Trust, the Pre-School Playgroups Association. We made things happen. Granada TV made us an award ... and later I was a bit embarrassed to get the OBE!

But life, or rather death, caught up with me. In 1967 K died. He’d had a heart condition. How I wished I could have made him stay at home and done all the earning myself. It was like losing a limb. More than 30 years later I still missed him. Sorting out his things I moaned like an animal.

I wanted to die, but my daughter needed me. I went back for five more years before ‘retiring’, though I still wrote for the page. I became more active. Always a feminist – ardent rather than strident – I marched with the Women’s Liberation Movement in 1971. I found some man-hating libbers – mainly American - a bit tiresome. But such are needed. And I joined the SDP, but was sad to find the ‘nice people’s party’ nasty enough when it came to procedural bickering! And at one meeting I was mistaken for a bag lady, with my woolly hat and hold-alls!

Friends always sustained me: some dear men, many women of all ages. When I was 80 they bought me a taxi service so I could remain active! Music – in choirs I now sang bass! Painting – I always returned from foreign hols with small water colours, often of doors! Seas are hard; I am rather good at skies. And my Blackheath garden is another joy, and the still-returning spring.

So much has been won – freedoms, equalities, yet so much still to be done. I am ever an optimist, and see men and women - and others ('the mind has no gender', I once said) - walking hand in hand into the future. As for death – I wanted to be able to go when I wanted, and maybe there is a spark that goes on; but whatever happens - ... THANK YOU.

Mart Stott , newspaperwoman, 1907-2002

Alison Skilbeck

[*Painting by Sarah Raphael (1994), entitled 'Women's Page Contributors to The Guardian', currently in the National Portrait Gallery, London.]