Campaigner Erin Pizzey reveals the story behind last week's court case – and

When Andrew Marr accused me of being a terrorist, it was like a bomb going off in my chest

By **Antonia Hoyle**

As she slumped on the sofa in her small South London flat, tears streamed down Erin Pizzey's face and splashed on to the book that lay on her lap.

Praised by critics for its 'superb' account of post-Second World War society, Andrew Marr's A History Of Modern Britain has secured his position as not just a political commentator but also a social historian. Yet it wasn't his prose that had stirred up such a reaction in Erin. It was that the book described her as a terrorist sympathiser.

In a chapter dealing with unrest in the Seventies, Marr wrote that Pizzey had been a 'cadet enthusiast' in the Angry Brigade, the militant anarchist group that detonated 25 bombs around London. As a peace activist and champion of women's rights, it was an allegation that left her almost breathless with disgust.

'It was as if a bomb had exploded in my chest,' Erin says. 'It was the most wounding thing I could have been accused of, after I had spent my life trying to protect people from violence. I even reported the Angry Brigade to the police.

'It brought all the memories of those years flooding back, opening the dreadful emotional scars they'd given me. It was my 70th birthday but I wasn't in the mood for celebrating. I couldn't stop crying.'

She fretted about the repercussions it would have on her life. Her son and grandchildren live in the United States, whose increasingly strict visa entry requirements ask visitors to disclose if they have ever been involved in 'terrorist activities'.

Erin, who read Marr's book in February, took legal action against his publishers Macmillan for defamation. Last week, at London's High Court, Macmillan offered her an unreserved apology and agreed to pay substantial damages and costs.

The action had centred on a single sentence in Marr's book stating that a young Pizzey was a member of the Angry Brigade who broke with the group over its plot to bomb Biba, a department store in Kensington, West London.

Macmillan's solicitor claimed the reference was intended to be 'entirely complimentary to Ms Pizzey quitting the milieu of radical politics to go off and do something self-evidently useful'. But he accepted that it could have been misunderstood and apologised unreservedly.

In fact, Pizzey said she had never even been a member of the Angry Brigade.

Although 250,000 copies of the book had been bought by the time the complaint was made, all unsold copies were recalled from stores and future editions will have the allegation removed.

For Erin, who founded the world's first women's refuge in Chiswick, West London, in 1971 and who has been to the High Court hundreds of times in her controversial campaign to liberate women from their abusive husbands, it was a triumph.

'Normally I'm in court because I'm in trouble. For once, I was getting an apology,' she says.

'I can't say how much I was awarded, but it wasn't about large sums of money. It was about putting the record straight. Now it's over I feel a great weight lifted.'

After the issue came to light, Marr, the BBC's former political editor who now presents his own Sunday morning current affairs programme, wrote an apologetic letter to Erin.

'Andrew said it had been a big cock-up. He wanted to come to my house and say sorry in person,' Erin says. 'I didn't reply because it was a live case, but I knew he hadn't written it maliciously and I would be happy to see him now. I've always admired Andrew. He is a breath of fresh air.'

So too, in her own way, is Pizzey. She is not, by her own admission, an academic. She left school with four O-levels and took a secretarial course. Erin has never even described herself as a 'feminist'. All she really wanted to do was help ordinary women.

Erin has not made any personal profit from her extraordinary commitment to women's issues. Her work, in fact, left her penniless and, after a spell in a homeless hostel – the irony of which is not lost on her – she now survives on income support and lives in a studio flat.

But what she lacks in education and material wealth she makes up for in warmth, wit and a desire to improve relations between men and women.

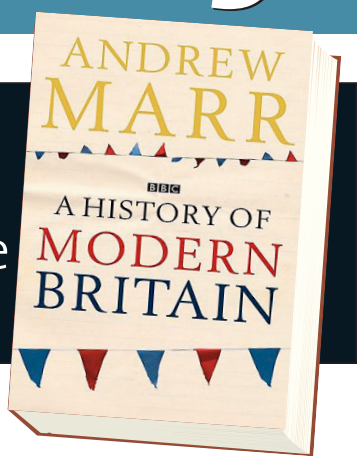
The daughter of a diplomat who was sent to boarding school at the age of nine, Erin spent much of her childhood in China, Beirut and the Far East. But her middle-class upbringing masked a violent family. Her mother would beat her with an iron flex and she describes her father as a bully.

She met her future husband, Naval Lieutenant Jack Pizzey, on a Hong Kong beach. They married when Erin was just 20 and had two children. 'I was the archetypal housewife and loved my family,' she says.

But in 1970 she read a newspaper column by feminist Jill Tweedie that talked of the need for solidarity, friendship and a sense of community between women. 'It was a revelation,' she says. 'I'd always defined myself by my relationship with my family. The idea of having an identity outside that was exciting. I wasn't interested in politics. I just wanted a sense of community.'

Somewhat naively, Erin joined the women's movement. Starting in America, feminism enjoyed a dramatic revival in the Seventies, and its new proponents would prove even more radical than the female suffragettes of the early 20th Century who chained themselves to railings to raise awareness of women's rights. Erin's excitement quickly dampened as she realised that, in fact, the group she joined had no interest in solidarity – the sole intention was to obliterate men from the structure of the family, destroy marriage and establish a new female supremacy.

> It's not about the money – it's about putting the record straight



'It was a ludicrous idea,' Erin says. 'It was like a born-again religion that believed women shouldn't use make-up or deodorant and should wear dungarees and boots.

'We weren't allowed to mention marriage. If we mentioned religion we had to refer to God as a woman. As a middle-class Christian who refused to take off her false eyelashes or stop talking about her family, I was seen as an outsider. But I stayed a member because aside from the screaming harridans, there were a lot of like-minded women.'

There were also, Erin says, violent members. 'One conference in Skegness ended up in a physical fight,' says Erin. 'The women were always at war about their policies and whether they were following Marxist or Chinese feminism. Lipstick lesbianism became popular and anyone who spoke with a posh accent, like me, would put on a mockney accent. As someone who wouldn't conform, they were hostile towards me.'

She says her husband was initially supportive but eventually, like other men, he came to regard the movement as a 'huge joke'.

Not that the women's movement was unique. Radical organisations such as American racial equality group, The Black Panthers, which had been invited to Britain, were gaining momentum and support.

'At one Black Panthers meeting a group of BBC producers had their fists in the air,' says Erin. 'Leftist thought came close to taking over the country. If you didn't agree you were described as a Right-wing fascist capitalist and were in danger. It was frightening.'

Then, of course, there was the Angry Brigade, intent on destroying both capitalism and Ted Heath's Government. They detonated bombs at the homes of Tory politicians as well as the offices of government and big businesses. Although nobody was killed, such violence created an atmosphere of fear in the capital.

Because of its anti-establishment aims, the Angry Brigade – predominantly white middle-class university dropouts – quickly grew links with the feminist movement. And one day, while Erin was in the women's movement's dilapidated office in London, she overheard a conversation that made her shudder.

'Some of the very young 18-year-old girls, who I already worried about, were smoking Gitane cigarettes,' she recalls. 'Gitanes were only available in France so I immediately wondered where they had got them from.

'Then they started discussing how the Angry Brigade was smuggling explosives in from France and whispering about rumours of a plot to blow up Biba. I realised they might be working as mules for the Angry Brigade. I told them that if they had anything to do with the bomb plot I was calling the police.'

Erin did make that call. 'I told them that the women's movement wasn't a women's movement at all, but a Marxist movement and that I suspected some members might be involved in a Biba bomb plot. The police officer was lovely.

'Of course, they couldn't find the Angry Brigade at that stage and I don't know if they questioned any of the women's movement.'

The next day, Erin told the movement what she had done and was banned immediately. 'They were discussing bombing a store that I shopped at with my children – what was I meant to do? I was terribly upset. My dream was shattered.'

Two weeks after she left the women's movement, a bomb exploded in Biba's stock room, prompting the evacuation of 500 women and children. 'They were anarchists who didn't stand for anything. It was more theatre than anything else. But it was also intimidating.'

The G20 protesters who stormed the City of London last week, she

tells how violence tainted Women's Lib

TIM GRAHAM / BBC

TAKING ACTION: Erin outside her women's refuge in West London in 1976. Top left: Author Andrew Marr

says, have much in common with those Seventies' protests. 'It's a way of channelling hatred and violence,' Erin says. 'They're just having a punch-up to see if they can make it on to television. But the Angry Brigade was the first group practising sustained bombing. The fact they couldn't be caught made them dangerous and they were an inspiration to the IRA. I wanted them locked up.'

It wasn't until the late summer of 1971 that four of the Angry Brigade's key members – John Barker, Jim Greenfield, Hilary Creek and Anna Mendleson – were arrested and charged with conspiracy to cause explosion. They were later convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison. Another defendant was Angela Mason, who in 2003 went on to become director of the Government's Women and Equality Unit.

The political violence had repercussions throughout the Seventies and Eighties. 'The uprisings from various groups were exhausting,' says Erin. 'And on a personal front, I was seeing battered women on a daily basis at the refuge.

'I risked prison to take their children away from their husbands. I saw one wife stabbed in the neck by her husband as they left the High Court. The more violence I saw, the more determined I became to find a peaceful resolution.'

Erin's feud with the women's movement grew as they took over the refuges she had opened and banned men from entering. 'They wanted a world where men were excluded and I didn't agree with that at all,' she explains.

Erin, who drifted apart from her husband Jack and divorced him in 1976, also developed the controversial theory that women were often as responsible for being abused as their husbands. It is a principle she still upholds today.

'If you're not leaving your husband it's because you're addicted to violence,' she claims. 'Chemicals in your brain can pull you into it.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Erin was ostracised by any remaining feminist sympathisers when she wrote about her theory in her second book, Prone To Violence, in 1982. She received anonymous telephone death threats and was provided with a police escort.

She spent the next 14 years in self-imposed exile in America and Italy, with her second husband Jeff Shapiro. They divorced in 1994.

Erin finally returned to Britain in 1996. Now her books sit on shelves next to pictures of her children. Her son Amos lives in Los Angeles with his wife, former Radio 1 DJ Lisa I'Anson, and their two children. Her daughter Cleo is a London-based social worker.

Erin, who plans to pay off her debts then publish her autobiography with the money she has received from the Andrew Marr case, lives off income support. It seems unjust that someone who has saved the lives of hundreds of women and paved the way for future generations is sleeping on a bed in a corner of her living room.

But she is not one for self-pity, and this case has bought back into focus Erin Pizzey's robust views on women and society.

'Strong women like Paula Radcliffe and J.K. Rowling are good role models now,' she says. 'I also have a soft spot for Katie Price [the model Jordan]. She's sharp, tough and loves her kids. I wish she thought more of herself and felt she didn't have to show off her body. She's better than that.'

Erin maintains her original belief that women need to stop competing with each other – these days in the form of cosmetic surgery and endless dieting. 'It's not men forcing us to do it – it's competition between each other,' she says.

She also called for the violence we saw last week to stop. 'In the G20 protests I can see the seeds being sown for what happened in the Seventies. It will chase away the decent people who want positive change.'

My PC police lecture on how to tell a joke

By **Jonathan Yardley**

WOLVERHAMPTON CITY COUNCILLOR

As I walked to my local police station I felt anxious and puzzled. It was a journey I'd taken many times, as the Wolverhampton city councillor in charge of liaising with officers. But this time the tables were turned. I was about to be questioned about that most modern of offences: homophobia.

I certainly didn't want to be at that interview and neither, I suspect, did the police. I'm sure they would rather have been catching criminals. That they could not do so is worrying for British society and the future of policing.

I'd decided to become a Conservative councillor after my father died at New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton. He'd contracted MRSA following an otherwise successful operation for cancer. At the same time, my daughter was refused a place at the local primary school and my house was burgled.

All three things are, sadly, commonplace. In a modest way, I wanted to make a difference. After being elected in 2003, I hauled New Cross's then chief executive before the council's health scrutiny board demanding he clean up his hospital.

After the Tories gained power in Wolverhampton, I was given responsibility for neighbourhoods, and my portfolio included working with police. Among my duties, I attend meetings organised by the city's Chief Supt Richard Green so residents can discuss policing and air any grievances.

Last October we were on the panel for just such an event at the civic centre. To get an idea of the people who come along and what they think, wi-fi handsets are issued. These are similar to those given to the Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? audience, although ours have only two buttons.

> The man wearing women's clothes did not complain

To test the handsets, we asked our audience to press A if they were male or B if they were female.

To general amusement, someone said: 'What if you're transgendered?' Amid much laughter I suggested they could press A and B simultaneously. It was taken in good spirit, and no one objected at the time, certainly not the officers.

That all changed later in the week, when Chief Supt Green told me: 'There's going to be a formal complaint about the joke you made.'

I was shocked. It turned out that the person who had asked about transgendered people was at the meeting with his partner, a man dressed as a woman. Later I had a phone call from the sergeant at Tettenhall station, the nearest to my home. He is an excellent officer with whom I've worked to bring down our local crime figures. He said I needed to attend the station to discuss my 'offence'.

With him at the station was an inspector whose patch included the civic centre where the 'offence' had taken place. Interestingly, they told me the objection had not come from the transsexual man or his partner. They then described what they thought I had said, but their version was inaccurate. I think this was deliberate – to test my reaction, to see how truthful and precise I was. After all, the chief superintendent had been there and knew exactly what happened. I then gave them every tiny detail.

They questioned whether I was homophobic or whether I had malign thoughts about transgendered people. I assured them I did not.

One of them told me he had gone on a course with transsexuals to learn about their lifestyle. It was like walking on eggshells, he said: they were constantly looking for an angle to file a complaint against him. The officers then pointed out that if anyone complained under anti-homophobia legislation, the police had to investigate. If they didn't, the case could be referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, and then the police themselves would be investigated.

I'm a Wolves fan and at soccer matches it's not unusual for derogatory remarks to fly between rival supporters. I suspect most games could produce at least 20,000 complaints for police to investigate.

'This is ridiculous,' I said.

'It's just a sign of the times,' replied the officers.

The inspector then described what I could and couldn't say in public. The full absurdity of the situation was dawning on me: a police inspector was giving me a lesson in comedy.

The meeting lasted two hours and the resulting paperwork probably took just as long. I was neither arrested nor charged and in the end no formal complaint was ever made. I still feel angry. Tettenhall is affluent but, like many towns, suffers from yobbery, car crime and burglary. It hardly needs saying that police resources should be focusing on these instead.

Of course, I never set out to cause offence. My joke was in the English camp tradition that gently uses humour to smooth over tricky situations. It was no more than that. We all have to show a little tolerance. Those who know me will have noticed I have little hair. Over the years, I've suffered jokes about baldness, but it's never worried me.

The most disturbing aspect of my 'offence' is that the objection did not come from the person supposedly offended. I never found out who was behind it, but believe it was probably political mischief-making.

As a councillor, I've enjoyed a great relationship with the police, and I'm determined this incident won't sully that good work. On the other hand, I'll still try to ease my colleagues' daily lives with gentle humour. And we'll have to change the buttons on those handsets. Two aren't enough. We'll need seven or eight to cover all sexual orientations.